NIPSYA

By Georges Bugnet
(Henri Doutremont)

Le Lys de Sang

Le Pin du Maskeg

By Constance Davies Woodrow

The Captive Gypsy

A Children's Caravan

The Celtic Heart

NIPSYA

by

Georges Bugnet

TRANSLATED
FROM THE
FRENCH
BY

Constance Davies Woodrow



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PART ONE

Chapter I

ADOLESCENCE

HALFWAY along the north shore of an oval lake, a steep-faced clearing juts out into the water. At the top of this bank, then covered with new grass, sat Nipsya, Indian fashion, her hands supporting a dog's head between her knees. Its eyes were gazing enquiringly into hers, but the girl was paying no attention to it.

Behind her, facing the lake, stood the shack where she was born. Built of round spruce-logs, dove-tailed at the four corners, its low, sloping roof was of poplar poles covered with alternate layers of moss and earth. Its walls had been whitened with marl.

Through the open door Nipsya's grandmother, a tall strong Indian woman, raw-boned and still nimble, was watching her grand-daughter, wondering the while at her unusual quietness, but Nipsya was taking no notice of her.

This north shore was almost desolate, save for a few families of Métis, whose homes, also marl-whitened, stood far apart, in stump-strewn clearings at the edge of the bush or in just such open spaces along the lake as that where sat Nipsya.

To the north-west, where this, Lac des Aigles

(Lake of the Eagles) had carved a channel through which it flowed to the Pembina and thence to the Athabasca, rose the palisade of the Hudson's Bay post, which stood on a hill.

To the west and south-west, there were no habitations. There lay the kingdom of the vast virgin forest, and over toward this wilderness, where the sun was setting, the lake, still strewn with floating ice, reflected a sky of red and gold. Its waters were tinted with scintillations of scarlet and pink and bronze, and its mobile mirror shot forth dazzling arrows of sunlight. Large eagles hovered above it, jet black against a sky of fire.

On the east, above the darkening waters, the high forested banks were turning purple.

In the south-east, where the country was more opened up, a few slender spirals of smoke were curling upward here and there among the hills, where the sun's last rays yet lingered. Those spirals of smoke marked the new homesteads of white settlers, who were already coming thus far. But it was not of them that Nipsya was thinking just now.

At this hour of falling dusk, the lake and all the surrounding forests re-echoed with vespers; from the foot of the steep bank rose myriad cries, the loudest being the croaking of frogs, the sharp, sonorous, triple note of the crow, the continuous, piercing chatter of blackbirds perched on the bare

branches of the willows; but this daughter of the lake and forest sat motionless. A pretty bird, glossy-black with crimson epaulets, lightly skimmed her hair with its wing; but Nipsya seemed neither to have seen nor felt it.

The first touch of spring was in the air, and the thawed-out country exhaled a strong odour of damp soil, of decaying plants steeped in water. It was the odour of universal and wholesome decay, the mold of new generations. The girl's nostrils dilated spasmodically, as if to inhale more deeply all the scents of life.

Was she blind and deaf? No; she could see every outline and every varying light; she could hear every sound; she was conscious of every odour; but at present nothing in the external world interested her.

For Nipsya was just sixteen. To-night, there stirred within her the dream-heritage of the Celtic peoples, bequeathed to her by a father whom she had never known, and, while night was falling over the land, in her soul and in her eyes there was breaking a dawn. . . .

From her Cree ancestry Nipsya had inherited an intuitive knowledge of wild nature, yet the days following that first soul-dawn were filled with surprises. Never as now had she understood the calls

of the forest animals or the cries of the birds on the lake. Hitherto, she had looked upon these living creatures only as objects of amusement, or, more often, as a source of food and profit. She had made a study of them merely to outdo them in cunning and kill them without mercy. And here she was divining in them a sort of kinship. She was beginning to hear mysterious calls within herself, and these calls, like a song of yearning, now faint, now louder, linked her to all those other lives expressing themselves in so many different tones. But Nipsya herself had as yet no idea where to seek the voice that might respond to hers, nor, in fact, had it yet occurred to her to seek it.

One morning, in a clump of dogwood near the water's edge, she found a nest containing four small eggs of a dull blue with brown spots. As she examined them, two little birds fluttered around and above her with anxious, plaintive cries. A few days later, four tiny birds were hatched. Before, this would have seemed to her quite ordinary, but now she began to meditate on that metamorphosis, without knowing why. She divined in it causes that were unknown to her and felt strangely drawn to the lowly, winged family.

The next day, while visiting one of the neighbouring families with her grandmother, she was suddenly seized with a deep tenderness for the little brown

baby which a young woman was nursing. She wished she might take it up and have it all to herself, but did not dare. She stopped to wonder at her sudden passion for babes, which, before, she had detested.

Another time, she passed an old Indian squatting beside a forest trail and saw the man's eyes glow suddenly with a sombre fire. Instinctively, she quickened her pace; then wondered afterwards what emotion had stirred her. She had not been afraid of the old man: she knew him; he was not dangerous. No; her fear had sprung from within herself. She had felt a peculiar tremor—a feeling of repulsion, she believed—which now awakened in her a curious sense of shame. But she had not understood herself very well for some time, and she abandoned this fresh problem, finding it too complex.

At other times, she was surprised to feel such keen delight in the simplest and commonest happenings. How was it that never before had she noticed the ineffable play of sunlight upon the waters of the lake; or those varying shades of green along the tops of the vast forests in the distance; or the hidden growth in the souls of flowers, whose buds burst open, one after another, like the eggs of birds?

But it was when the silence and shadows of night were falling over the land, that she was most conscious of her newly-awakened joy. Then, rather than during the day, came strange and solemn question-

ings. Were the stars fixed in that vast sky? Did the spirit of the lake and those of the forest sleep at night? Were there really spirits around her, some of them good and ready to help her, others evil and wishing her harm? Or might there be just one Great Spirit governing everything, as the white people said? She was drawn to this idea: it explained better the regular order of the seasons and the unfailing renewal of their beauty. She would have liked to be quite sure that this beneficent power reigned everywhere supreme.

Returning to the shack, she would lie down beside her grandmother on a large moose-skin spread over a bed of pliant spruce-boughs, and having covered herself with a heavy buffalo-robe, would fall asleep pondering all those vague day-dreams. From night to night, all these things became a little clearer, and it always surprised her that she had not thought about them before.

Chapter II

HUDSON'S BAY POST

ONE day, it occurred to her that she might improve her personal appearance. Hitherto, her clothing had been of moose- or caribou-skin, but several of her friends had just made themselves dresses of some new cloth which the last winter convoy had brought from the east by dog-train to the lake post. It was nearly four months since Nipsya had been there, but on that occasion, she and her grandmother having had a good trapping season, the factor had assured her that their credit was still good. She decided to go there at once. She would have preferred the canoe, but the lake was very choppy. She was obliged to make the journey barefooted, as the trail was still very muddy in places. This was the main trail, extending from Fort Edmonton on the North Saskatchewan to the Peace River country; it passed not far behind Nipsya's home.

As she climbed the hill to the palisade-gate, she heard laughter. This disturbed Nipsya: she had never liked ridicule. She fancied it was because the high wind was tossing her hair and lifting her short skirt. She hated to feel that her legs were being

stared at, but kept on climbing, without haste and with downcast eyes, for she was anxious to appear unconcerned. But as she drew nearer, it became evident that the laughter came from inside the palisade, and, venturing to look up, she saw that the gate was deserted.

Suddenly, she was furious with herself. Where had her wits been of late? Where could she be getting such silly notions? Undoubtedly, it wasn't pleasant to be laughed at, but why should she feel such a scorching emotion now? And why that new trick of walking with her eyes on the ground so that she made a fool of herself?

Feeling reassured, she raised her head and went boldly inside the palisade.

Five men were standing at the store-entrance. Nipsya knew them all but one. The three who were laughing, with their backs half-turned to her, were old voyageurs: Hormidas Beaudoin, Baptiste Paquette, and Napoléon Lachance. The blond young man who stood with folded arms, blocking the doorway with his broad shoulders, was Monsieur Alec, the Hudson's Bay factor. But the other man, whom the voyageurs were dragging back, was a Cree Indian whom she had never met. He looked furious.

"Hello, Nipsya!"

At the factor's familiar greeting, she could not

help lowering her eyes, though not for long: she was inquisitive.

"Here's an Indian who wants to turn me out of the store," said the factor. "He claims that all the Indians and the Métis have put their heads together to drive the English out of the West. Do you know the story, too? They say the malcontents of the district are going to make your cousin, Vital Lajeunesse, their leader."

She came nearer without answering. Usually she found it hard to understand Monsieur Alec. He spoke French like the people of the Old Country, they said, while his English had the hoarse accent of the Scots. However, she knew quite well what he meant: she had often heard her grandmother discussing it with others. But such matters scarcely interested her; besides, even if they had, she would not have betrayed any understanding of them.

The factor regarded her with a smile for a moment, and then, turning to the Indian, said:

"Be reasonable, Mahigan! I have already advanced you credit for a hundred beavers, and this is only May!"

Ah! So it was Mahigan? He had a bad reputation in the district: he was said to be a sorcerer. He was a handsome fellow, and powerful, too: the three voyageurs had had a hard job to hold him back a few moments ago. At present, he was stand-

ing motionless, his black eyes staring fixedly at Nipsya, and again she felt an impulse to lower her head. Fortunately, he shifted his gaze and, turning to the factor again, said in Cree:

"Louis Riel is going to come back soon and start war again. We will be robbed no longer! You white men have destroyed the beaver; the bison, moose, and caribou are disappearing, too. You white men are worse than timber-wolves!"

They all broke into laughter again, and Monsieur Alec, who understood Cree well, though he did not speak it, replied in French:

"Naturally, since your name is Mahigan, (Timber-Wolf), you don't want to put the blame on your four-legged brothers. Yet you know quite well that you yourself are the worst of the pack. It's a shame that a hunter and trapper of your reputation should spend his whole season's earnings in two weeks, in the bar-rooms of Fort Edmonton!"

Meanwhile, the three old voyageurs had released Mahigan and were talking together in low tones, with smothered laughs. Then, Baptiste Paquette approached the factor:

"Give him his chance, Mr. Stuart! Mahigan's a smart fellow. If he can break in your broncho, we three and you will be prepared to pay for what goods he takes. That will be a fair bargain!"

The factor burst out laughing.

"Baptiste, you ought to pay for them, yourself! You almost vouched for the honesty of the Indian who sold me that mare; and no one has been able to mount or saddle her yet. But after all, that was my fault as much as yours. If Mahigan agrees, the bargain is struck."

"Fetch the cayuse!" said the Indian.

The three voyageurs went off, laughing, in the direction of the stable, while Mahigan, from pride, stood motionless. The factor said to the girl:

"Why, you have grown up all of a sudden, Nipsya, and pretty, too! What is it you want?"

She followed him into the store and made the purchases for herself and her grandmother. It seemed to her that Monsieur Alec was looking at her a great deal and showing her unusual consideration. When he had finished tying up her parcel, he leaned toward her, with his elbows on the counter, and said, with smiling eyes:

"You must come and see me sometimes, Nipsya. You don't look dull. I'll teach you to read books."

The girl looked at him innocently and with some astonishment. She had understood what he said, but was at a loss to know why a gentleman such as he should take this sudden interest in so poor a girl as she. She had no time to solve this new problem, however, for sounds of a commotion made her hurry

outside. The factor followed her, and both stood leaning against the door-post.

"We managed to get the saddle on her!" shouted Baptiste Paquette. "It was no joke, I can tell you!"

They came out of the stable, Beaudoin holding the mare by a rein of rawhide. She was a handsome animal, small, slender, and wiry, and reddish-brown with large white patches. She pranced backward in the direction of Mahigan, who had not stirred. Now and then, she attempted to rear and kick out with her front hoofs, but Beaudoin was too powerful for her. She carried a Western saddle, with high pommel, back band, and large wooden stirrups. The bridle-rein, a thick cord, lay loose over the pommel. Nipsya admired the animal, and the saddle even more, for there were not many of its kind to be seen in the neighbourhood. Her heart thumped a little at the thought that Mahigan was about to risk his life, at the least his limbs. Would he dare?

When the mare was no more than six feet away from him, he said curtly:

"Cut the rein, short!"

With the factor's pocket-knife, Beaudoin severed it with one stroke. Nipsya saw the cayuse back sharply. Mahigan gathered himself together, leaped like a lynx, and landed in the saddle.

For the next hour, Nipsya forgot her own affairs in watching that remarkable struggle; she seemed

to be taking part in it, herself. The cayuse employed all the cunning and endurance of her race, the Indian all the cunning and endurance of his. Soon, Nipsya felt her fears disappear and the lust of battle take possession of her. She gloried in such skill and energy in a man of her own race—the race despised by the white men. She thought now that no white man was Mahigan's equal. She was proud of him, and through him, of the Cree people. He, for his part, seemed conscious of this admiration, and directed toward her more than one glance eloquent of bold assurance and a little conceit.

At the end of an hour, the struggle grew monotonous and the outcome certain. It was then that Nipsya made up her mind to start for home.

As she went, she pondered the outstanding events of the combat, and Mahigan assumed the rôle of hero. Hadn't he proved to those white men that the Crees could excel them? Even Monsieur Alec, who next to Vital Lajeunesse, was considered the strongest man at the lake, hadn't been able to subdue that broncho. She recalled that on one occasion her grandmother had said:

"If the Crees can act together, the English won't hold out against them."

Yes, Nipsya thought now, if there should be war, the English would be driven out.

That was as far as her political reflections went.

Chapter III

REVELATION

FOR a whole week Nipsya worked industriously with scissors and needle.

Her grandmother, who disliked innovations, watched the progress of this work and finally said:

"You met some young man?"

But Nipsya, who took out of those words only a vague meaning, could see no connection between a young man and her dressmaking. She only half-listened when her grandmother was in a bad humour, having learned long ago that it was better *not to answer back*. She *wanted* a *pretty* summer dress. She neither knew nor wondered why such a desire had come to her.

The result of her labours was a short-sleeved blouse of dark purple, the colour of ripe *atocas* (Western cranberries), and a pretty velvet skirt as green as balsam-needles and reaching scarcely to her ankles. Usually, she went bare-legged and bare-footed, but when it pleased her she put on leggings of soft caribou leather and yellow moccasins of moose-hide, trimmed with tiny beads of red and blue glass. With a brilliant-studded tortoise-shell comb above the nape of her neck, where her two

braids divided to fall over her shoulders and breast, she felt quite elated and conscious of a new pride.

She was not only delighted with her gayer appearance: she felt more in harmony with the blossoming spring. At the end of June the sides of the steep slope were ablaze with red lilies that lasted two weeks, and Nipsya wondered a hundred times a day why she had never before found so much joy in their beauty.

By this time of the year, the lake was warm enough to suggest that it would be very pleasant to bathe in the heat of the afternoon. In previous summers, Nipsya had always bathed where and when she liked, without attaching any importance to the matter, but now, the thought of undressing just anywhere made her feel vaguely uneasy. She remembered that on the west side of the lake, at the edge of the vast Forêt des Aigles (Forest of the Eagles), and far from any habitation, there was a little cove shut off from the rest of the lake shoreline by a fringe of rushes and reeds. Thither she went in her birch canoe.

Instead of landing at that very spot, she beached her canoe a little to the south of it, then made her way through the dense thicket of alders and viburnums that lined the bank, to the sandy cove which had attracted her. When her practised eyes had examined the bushes and the grass-covered earth, no-

ticing all the tracks there, she knew that she was alone.

At the spot where she entered the water, she was completely hidden from the lake by the tall rushes and reeds enclosing that little calm gulf, from which a flat rock protruded, while the steep bank, heightened by alders and willows, sheltered her on the other three sides with a broad screen of foliage. And yet, though sure that she was alone, she felt an inward disquietude that oddly surprised her. It was as though she had another self now, another and graver personality of which she was a little afraid.

It was the first time that year that she had taken off all her clothes and she was astonished at her changed appearance. The previous summer, she had had lank limbs, bony hips, a flat chest, and a thin face; and now, as she knelt on the flat stone, her hands resting on the edge of it, what a lovely reflection met her gaze! She saw mirrored in the water, in the shadow of the reeds, an oval face, plump cheeks, a dimpled chin, a small red mouth, a delicately-shaped nose, very beautiful eyes with long dark lashes, and, if the mirror did not lie, a complexion extraordinarily white for a Métisse. Why, her whole body was changed! Her limbs had become rounded, her breasts softly curved. Was it any wonder that she found her reflection pleasing and admired it? And yet, all the time, she had the

feeling that that other personality, hitherto unsuspected, was watching her. This caused her a vague embarrassment which she could shake off only by shifting her thoughts from her body. All the same, it was most interesting, this entirely new body. Certain parts of it filled her with wonder, but that inward surveillance, which was like a warning, restrained her from satisfying her newly-awakened curiosity.

Hitherto, she had believed herself mistress of every thought and action, and now, a silent inexorable force, which, nevertheless, she felt to be herself, was warning her against something, the nature of which she scarcely understood but dimly guessed.

She soon tired of this inward conflict, for she was not given to reasoning. Plunging into the water, she enjoyed herself with all her youthful energy and came out chilled, since the lake was not yet very warm.

From that day, her reflections upon, and instinctive perceptions of the moral life multiplied. Gradually, she discovered a key to the mystery of living things. And though she failed to comprehend the inexplicable duality which made her rebel against herself so frequently now, she understood her whole self better; she was conscious of her weakness and her dignity. And so it was that Nipsya became a woman, a woman with shy, serious eyes.

It was not long before she was given the opportunity to bring her budding soul to perfect bloom. As butterflies drawn to the newly-opened flower, several youths of the neighbourhood hovered about her. But they were all too close to their savage ancestors. Nipsya was repelled by their base thoughts, their boorish manners, and their dark complexions. She did not recognize a kindred spirit in any one of them. And yet, at times, when she was near them, the conflict between her body and her conscience made itself felt again and more strongly. But she understood better now wherein lay the danger and why the still, small voice within her gave warning of it; and the stoical, proud, and masterful will bequeathed to her by her Indian forefathers kept her out of such danger almost without effort.

And so, until the middle of the summer, Nipsya was able to remain a proud and modest maid.

Chapter IV

VITAL LAJEUNESSE

SOMEBODY is coming to see us, my child," said Nipsya's grandmother. "*Ma médecine marche fort.* ('My medicine is running strong.') I believe it is my grandson."

Among the Crees, particularly among the women, there is frequently found a faculty which civilized peoples have lost almost entirely. This intuition, which touched some sensitive fibre in her grandmother's breast when a relative was coming to see her, or caused the nerves in the hollow of her left hand to contract when a baby was expected in the neighbourhood and someone was coming to ask her services as a midwife, had revealed itself to Nipsya many times. But the *médecine* did not always *marche fort*: often, her grandmother was not quite sure. To-day, there could hardly be any doubt, since she spoke of Vital whom they seldom saw, though he lived almost opposite, on the south-east shore of the same lake.

Nipsya was delighted. Of all the young men in the district, Vital Lajeunesse was the only one who had not yet come to see her.

As he might come for dinner, and might bring

his sister Alma and perhaps his father, the Bonhomme Lajeunesse, Nipsya first helped her grandmother prepare a good and abundant meal. Fortunately, they still had some pike, smoked over birch-shavings, some dried perch, and some fresh, rich whitefish. They had even had the good luck, the previous evening, to snare four wild pigeons, which were fast becoming very scarce. They had some pemmican, too. The strawberries were already all gathered, or had withered; on the sunny bank, but Nipsya found some in the cool of the aspen wood, at the back of the house, and had quickly picked enough since the wood-strawberries are larger. She also discovered some ripe raspberries on the top of a beaver dam.

In that section of the country, the third week in July often brings the hottest days of the year, and in order to keep the house cool, the two women made no fire there at all. They had long since built a low stone fireplace not far from the house, and there they usually set the frying-pan or the iron pot.

Nipsya made herself responsible for the housecleaning. She removed the skins and robes from the bed of spruce-boughs and spread them on the grass at the back of the house, and then cleared away the boughs themselves. After scouring with home-made potash both the table and the spruce-blocks that

served for seats, she put fresh white, oiled parchment on the three windows. She had recently made herself a new broom of green, pliant balsam-branches of summer growth—their needles do not break off so easily as those of autumn branches—so the sweeping was done quickly and efficiently.

When the housework was finished, she went down to the lake to see if a canoe were pushing off from the opposite shore. But the sun was in her eyes, and the water was like an immense sheet of rippled glass, shimmering and sparkling, and dazzling her sight. After bathing her legs and arms and face, she washed her hair, braiding it carefully before it was quite dry. Then she went back to the house and put on her best leggings and her prettiest moccasins. The brilliant-studded tortoise-shell comb completed her attire.

Her grandmother, coming in for a moment, regarded her gravely.

"My child, your cousin listens to the Black-Robes. He and his sister have been brought up by them. Your trouble will be wasted."

"But, grandmother, they are rich! We mustn't make them ashamed of us."

"*Hunhun!*"

Her grandmother made this sound of understanding or affirmation with her nose and throat, without opening her mouth. It is the customary response of

the Cree Indian and is like the sound made by a civilized man when clearing his throat quickly and discreetly.

Nipsya went back down the slope and sat in the shade of a solitary birch at the edge of the bank. Nervously, she broke off a twig from the willow which had its roots in the sand and gravel of the shore below and which thrust its glossy, rounded head against her knees. Stripping the twig savagely, leaf by leaf, she broke it in tiny pieces, crushing the last piece with her teeth. Always, when she was angry, it was upon some willow that she vented her feelings.

She realized that for some time she and her grandmother had not shared the same ideas. Until now, her grandmother had never said anything against Vital or Alma; indeed, she had even voiced regret that she saw them so seldom. Why did she now accuse them of being partial to the Black-Robes? If she did not like new ideas, Vital and Alma were free, the more so since they were not pure Crees. Could that be the reason, then, that she and her grandmother so seldom crossed the lake? Until this moment, Nipsya had always imagined that the ill-feeling existed only toward the Bonhomme Lajeunesse, because, when marrying her grandmother's eldest daughter, Nipsya's aunt, he had asked the rites of a Black-Robe. She had deduced this from

her grandmother's reluctance to speak of those things, even to the old people who knew about them. But Nipsya did not see why a mere difference in creeds should put her on bad terms with her uncle and cousins.

At heart, she was annoyed at being found out, for she knew quite well that it was for Vital, rather than for her uncle and Alma, that she had gone to so much trouble. But even so, it was carrying suspicion too far to suggest that she was setting out to attract him with a view to marriage, and that had certainly been the underlying meaning of her grandmother's words. Nipsya's thoughts had never gone so far as that. Indeed, she and Vital scarcely knew each other. So what need was there for her grandmother to vex her like that? Besides, wasn't she herself going to the trouble of preparing a fine meal for the expected callers? So she, too, was anxious to make a good impression. Wasn't that an odour of tea, even,—not muskeg tea but, if her nostrils were not mistaken, real tea such as the white people used?

At that moment, her watchful eyes noticed among the scintillations of the lake a dancing black speck. It was approaching very swiftly and in a very straight line.

"That must be my uncle," she thought. "No one else can paddle like that."

In another fifteen minutes, she could make out

three figures quite clearly. Then she went back to the shack. Half-closing the door, she went over to the far corner on the right, where there was more shadow, and, with hands clasped behind her back, stood there, waiting, while her grandmother busied herself with little details.

Soon, quite close at hand, they heard voices:

"Good old dog! There's not much life in you any more, eh? And the sun feels good to your old bones. . . . Ah! That same old iron pot of mine! Mother knows how to look after it. It's too bad she won't come and live with us. I don't want to say too much, Alma, but your convent cooks have a lot to learn from the natives!"

"Get away with you, father! You eat a lot of everything I cook, anyway!"

"Hello, Mother!" the Bonhomme called out. "May we come in to see you?"

The old woman opened the door wide and bade them welcome in Cree.

"Good day, Cléophas! And Vital! And Alma! Dinner is all ready. Come inside!"

They entered, the father first, holding his great shoulders and massive head very erect; he had a beautiful white beard and thick grey hair falling to the nape of his neck. Alma followed, tall and sprightly, then Vital, who was obliged to stoop under the doorway.

Alma ran to Nipsya, kissed her on the lips as was the custom in those parts, and said:

"How tall you are! Come and kiss father!"

Shyly, Nipsya yielded her lips to her uncle, then to her cousin Vital.

"*Bâtèche!*" cried Cléophas. "Talk about pretty girls! It's a good thing I'm now the old Bonhomme Lajeunesse! I'd have made mother mad again for sure! But come! Let's sit down!"

The old woman had already poured the boiling tea into the cups, and now, beginning with the Bonhomme's, she filled the plates. For some time they ate in silence, until the Bonhomme remarked:

"Though there's no love lost between us, mother, you won't mind my saying that you're a good cook. My wife took after you in that. She made life pleasant for me."

"*Hunhun!*"

"Yes, indeed! We got on fine together, and you can never say that I didn't make life pleasant for her. It wasn't my fault, and you needn't blame me for it either, if that Irish good-for-nothing went to the devil with your youngest daughter and they weren't seen again. They left you Nipsya, anyway, and I can see that you haven't lost by the exchange. She looks a very nice child."

"*Hunhun!*"

Nipsya was listening with all her ears. Nobody

but her uncle would have dared to speak of such things. She wished she might ask him to-day what he knew of that Irishman who was her father. She had heard her mother spoken of, sometimes, and it had been said that she bore a strong resemblance to the Bonhomme's wife. Nipsya could not believe this. She had known her aunt well, but the latter was well on in years at the time; and Nipsya knew that her mother had died quite young.

Alma, in her turn, said in Cree:

"Grandmother, will you come and help us with the haying? Vital would like to put up at least a hundred loads, so as to have some to sell to the new settlers next winter. We would all go at it together."

"Why don't you look for a man?"

"They ask too much. With you, we could come to some agreement."

"*Hunhun!*"

"Grandmother," said Vital then,—and he, too, spoke Cree,—"we don't want you to come and help us against your will. We are asking you to do us a favour because we need you. You are a good cook. Then Alma would be free to help with the haying, and Nipsya, too, if she liked. You can't refuse us that."

"So I am still good for something, sometimes?" the old woman said.

"Why, of course!" Vital replied. "Only, until now, we haven't dared ask you."

"On account of your father, who is far too proud and would rather give than receive?"

"Now look here, mother!" said Cléophas. "Haven't I already asked you a score of times, even when my wife was alive? But if it is still a matter for quarrelling. . . ."

Vital interrupted him:

"Father, give me a chance! Grandmother, don't be unkind! You see that father is asking you, too. It is merely a question of a little yielding on both sides, instead of taking a stand against one another. If you agree, you shall have all your winter's provisions supplied and we will still be in your debt."

Behind her mask of unbending pride, the old Indian woman was somewhat covetous.

"*Hunhun*! We shall see!"

Nipsya, who understood her well, knew that she was going to consent, but that she was afraid they might jeopardize their good fortune by being too eager. Nipsya herself had been delighted at first, at this unexpected proposition. But now, she was feeling rather depressed and a little resentful, too, because they were addressing themselves only to her grandmother and were not paying any attention to herself. She was being treated as a child even yet.

There was a brief silence; then Vital went on:

"If that suits you, grandmother, you could cross in five days' time. I have had news from Louis Riel by one of his *coureurs*. There will be a meeting at the ford on the Rivière aux Reflets Rouges (River of Red Reflections), the day after Sainte-Anne's Day. You could come with us."

Keenly interested this time, the Indian woman abandoned her haughty, taciturn attitude. She discussed the projected meeting with the two men until well beyond the end of the meal.

Alma, after joining in the discussion occasionally, drew her cousin out of doors. As the sun was scorchingly hot, they went and sat under the large birch at the edge of the bank.

Alma said:

"Vital and I have been wondering for a long time how we could persuade grandmother to come and live with us. Though she is still active, she is getting old; and in these times, it's not safe for two women to live all alone. We had a talk with father so that he wouldn't get too excited. Our plan seems to have worked splendidly. I think she will accept, don't you?"

"Yes, I think so."

"You have grown as lovely as a flower, Nipsya. If Vital wanted to marry you, you would make a fine pair."

"Vital doesn't bother about me."

"Oh, I don't know! One can never tell what Vital is thinking unless he speaks. But you have lots of time yet. A couple must be suited to each other before they marry. As for me, I haven't yet found any *cavalier* to my taste. How about you?"

"No."

Nipsya was well aware that her replies were somewhat cool. But, apart from the fact that she did not speak French fluently, which language Alma preferred, she was experiencing a disappointment, a disillusionment even, that forced her to retire within her shell. She was not accustomed to such cool treatment from young men. She was showing Alma the same indifference as Vital had shown to herself. Besides, what right had they to arrange her own and her grandmother's affairs like that, without asking her opinion?

"Even if grandmother does agree to go for the haying, it's not certain that she will want to stay on afterwards," she said. "We understand each other perfectly, grandmother and I."

"Oh!" said Alma. "You are afraid that she and father will quarrel? But you know quite well that their quarrels never come to anything. They have their pride, but they understand each other. Besides, when the one speaks French and the other Cree, the quarrel can never go very far."

That was not the idea which Nipsya had intended

to convey, but feeling that further explanation would make matters worse, she restrained herself. Instinctively, she reached out for a willow-twig to bite at, but her hand recoiled as if it had touched nettles, while her face crimsoned furiously. Right beside her, she had caught sight of a yellow moccasin and a blue cloth trouser-leg. How had such a heavy man been able to approach without her hearing him, when she had such sharp ears? Had he heard what she had said?

But Alma, who observed her cousin's quick movement and her blush, had seen her brother.

"Vital has the ways of an Indian. Did he frighten you?"

He sat down beside Nipsya with a slow, deliberate movement that suggested a trained suppleness. For the first time, in the proximity of a young man, Nipsya experienced fear. She pressed her hands tightly together between her knees and lowered her head. Yet at a glance she had seen that he was smiling, but it was a cool, even a mocking smile, she thought.

"Father and grandmother are smoking their pipes," he said. "She is doing him that honour, and as you know, Nipsya, she only accords it to men she considers worthy of it. But even if we have scored a victory in her quarter, I am not at all sure about

you. You are angry with us for not asking your opinion."

She reddened again, thinking that he had seen through her only too well. But why should her eyes fill with tears? And why should her throat contract so that she could not answer him? Could it be that she really was a child yet? She found it advisable to pay great attention to a gadfly that had settled on her moccasin. Her large reddish-brown eyes were glistening in the sun like its wings. How inquisitive that circle of wild ducks were, watching her from the lake below! To be sure, even they must think her foolish, Perhaps they were jeering spirits who had taken that form.

"Don't you see," Vital went on, "that it's better for you, too? Over the lake, you will stand a better chance of making a good match. And Alma will be company for you. As for me, I would be very glad to have you come."

At this, a sweet emotion such as she had never experienced before softened her completely. Nevertheless, she was still a little suspicious that he might have said that just to draw her into their schemes. She was well aware that he understood her better than she understood herself. And he had got around her grandmother so easily. If only she had the courage to meet his eyes!

"Come for the beginning of the haying, at any

rate," he continued. "You won't be obliged to stay if we don't get on together. Is that settled?"

"Yes," she murmured grudgingly.

"But, my goodness, Nipsya, you are worse than an Indian!" cried Alma.

To be called an Indian is to a Métis a stinging, intolerable insult. Nipsya sprang up, but at that moment was struck in the face with a handful of grass. She preferred this diversion to such a serious conversation. Seizing Alma by the wrists, she rolled her over without mercy.

"Take that back, or I'll make you eat your grass!"

"My! Nipsya, you are as strong as a man! Forgive me! Forgive me!"

Nipsya was quite proud of exhibiting her strength before Vital.

"Come on, Alma!" she cried. "Which of us will reach the house first?"

They started off together for the top of the slope, Alma's grey dress pursuing the purple and green flight of Nipsya, who was as swift and light as a dragon-fly. At the door, Nipsya turned, laughing softly; but her cousin Vital was looking at the lake. At first, she felt resentful, then embarrassed as she realized that she was indeed behaving like a child and that such was not the way to win his esteem, since he was different from other young men.

The two girls re-entered the cool room, where

Vital joined them a little later. They listened to ~~the talk of the old people, who, so long as they were~~ not discussing religion, got on well together, for they had many ideas in common yet differed sufficiently to avoid boring one another. The Bonhomme was saying:

"The young people nowadays haven't the adventurous spirit. All they think about is settling down on one piece of land and never budging away from it. I am not saying they should not! It's something to open up a country, clear the big timber, and break the ground. I'm not finding fault with Vital for that, or my other children who took up land at Batoche and Red River. They're making their living, and that is something. But what has happened to the life we knew? What's become of the old voyageurs? They used to leave these parts and go away up to the Mackenzie for furs. Why, one year, Paquette, Beaudoin, and myself went up as far as Great Bear Lake. That was a real trip!"

The old woman removed her pipe to say:

"*Hunhun*! In those days the Crees had nothing to complain about!"

"*Non, bâtèche*! If we got fine skins, we were paid for them. I believe my two partners and myself brought in well-nigh half the stuff that is at the post to-day. We didn't get rich like the Hudson's Bay Company, but we made friends and had a

good time. There isn't an Indian to-day who would refuse old Lajeunesse a pipe of tobacco. Yes, mother, it was Cléophas Lajeunesse and his old-time partners who supplied them with guns, powder and shot, traps and axes, needles and saucepans, and the whole outfit. We had our hardships as well as our rosy times, in those days; but we were men."

"*Hunhun!*" said the old woman. "A Cree wouldn't have done better. When I was a girl, such things weren't known. We owe them to the voyageurs."

"But look at the young people of to-day!" Cléophas went on. "Forever grazing on the same spot, like a tethered horse. *We* could never have been content with that, so long as we had any 'go' in us. When we reached one shore, we wondered what could be behind yonder big hill, or beyond those great woods, or past the bend in the river. We might even find gold there. We set out; we prospected. We found nothing, of course. But there were always other hills and other rivers, and we made friends with the Indians; besides, we had seen new places and had a fine time. But the young people nowadays are beginning to do what the settlers of Lower Canada and the old districts did. They crowd against each other, and one man will wrangle because his neighbour takes a bit of his land. It's no exaggeration to say that trouble will come of it, as at Red River.

As for me, if it weren't that Vital needs me and is a good son, I would take my canoe again and make another trip up north with Paquette and Beaudoin. There is still lots of room up there for everybody."

"*Hunhun*! It is all the Black-Robes' fault!"

"No, indeed, mother! They didn't start it. They didn't take your lands."

Vital got up.

"Father, suppose we go and get the things out of the canoe?"

Cléophas Lajeunesse hesitated for a moment, then he, too, got up, and both men went down to the lake. The old woman put her pipe in her pocket and sat silent, while the girls cleared away the remains of the meal and washed the table; the men laid the things on it as they brought them in.

"Here's a little salt, some sugar, a handful of tea, and some matches," said Cléophas. "The largest parcel is husked barley: you cook it the same way as wild rice. All this is not much, but it's gladly given. And now, it's time we were thinking of going. In this hot weather the flies are very hard on the cattle; the cows run devil knows where if the smudge goes out. It takes some time to round them up."

"*Hunhun*!"

"Well, good-bye, mother! It's settled. You are to come and stay overnight with us on the eve of Sainte-

Anne's Day, and we will leave early in the morning for Lac Sainte-Anne. If the wind is bad, we will try to come over for you."

The old woman stood up and suffered her son-in-law and her two grandchildren to kiss her. She had never liked such customs. Nipsya accepted the kissing with a better grace. They had been rather high-handed and a little sly, too, in dealing with their grandmother, but Nipsya had to recognize that they had been actuated by the kindest motives. Besides, was she not helping them by her own silence? Wasn't she even happy about it deep in her heart? Wasn't she even beginning to hope that her grandmother would decide to stay there always, in the big white house across the lake?

When she offered her lips to Vital, she lowered her eyes, shyly. But after kissing her, he put his hands on her shoulders and forced her backward a little. She liked the touch of those two strong hands that could be so light. She raised her eyes for a moment and saw that he was looking at her, mockingly, yes, but the depths of his eyes were kind and sincere.

After their visit, Nipsya found the week go slowly. She experienced a passive idleness, a strange lassitude, together with a vague longing to shake it off and go after she knew not what.

When night came—the short night of that particular season and latitude, when the sun, barely hidden behind the pole, like a great fire behind a low hill, causes a kind of twilight in the vast country of lake and forest,—Nipsya would sit on the steep bank for a long time. Alone with the lake, the forest, and the sky, her dreams were as placid and as simple as those of the large white swan resting motionless at the edge of the reeds nearby. She responded to these influences with an unconscious joy such as the blue campanulas around her must have felt as they drank up the dew.

When the moon rose over that peaceful country, enhancing the magic of the night with its radiance—pearl on the leaves, mother-of-pearl on the waters—Nipsya enjoyed, through sight, smell, and hearing, all things as they were, for hers was but a primitive simplicity. She was not able to distort existing things by arbitrary conceptions or analytical meditations. She allowed herself to absorb impressions, conscious that she was but a tiny atom of Nature's vast world in which so many different lives were intermingled and so many hidden powers were at work. Like her grandmother and her long line of ancestors, Nipsya instinctively accepted those hidden powers as so many spirits or manitous. She did not go so far as to deify them, but credited them with certain superhuman activities which seemed

to her, at present, wholly beneficent. Unconsciously, she interpreted all their manifestations favourably. She had not yet made up her mind to single out a guardian spirit from among the familiar creatures, but in these days she liked to imagine that the large white swan, resting motionless at the edge of the reeds each night, might be the one who watched over her. There even went up from the depths of her being, without her knowing it, a secret hymn of adoration.

Sometimes, she asked herself the why and wherefore of things. Out of what were they born? What became of them when they died? Who were right, the Crees, or the white men? She resigned herself easily to uncertainty; it did not take away from her any of the sweetness of her emotions. If the Spirit of Death presented itself occasionally, it did not remain: she was still so young, so strong. But even so, some intuition whispered to her of that immortality of the soul about which the Indians and the white men were agreed. At times, even, she was surprised by a fleeting perception of the infinite, as, on a summer night, a flash of lightning passes through the heart of the world between earth and sky.

In the midst of all these day-dreams, there was a happy smile on her lips because over all things lay a radiance such as she had never before seen, either on the lake, or over the forests, or on the face of the sky.

Chapter V

THE BIG WHITE HOUSE

LATE in the afternoon of the appointed day, the lake being calm, Nipsya and her grandmother placed their dog and a few belongings in the birch canoe and in due time landed on the south-east shore, in front of the Lajeunesse home. The Lajeunesse family had seen them from a distance, and all three ran to help them clamber up the low cliff, Vital relieving his grandmother of her burden of blankets. This preference surprised and displeased Nipsya, but when they reached the top of the cliff, he kissed her. Less shy this time, she did not quite close her eyes; she noticed that her cousin's were again a little mocking, yet kind and sincere.

The big white house was barely fifty feet away. The door of the main room was open to the east, and, the sun being low in the north-west, the interior seemed rather dark at first.

As soon as she was inside, Nipsya felt a sense of peace and security. With a happy smile on her lips, she looked at everything with a fresh but quiet curiosity. From a seat opposite the north window, which had glass panes, she examined the large cook-stove that stood against the wall on her right, and

the long stove-pipe that passed over her head and out through the centre of the high roof. In front of her, with his back to the north window, her uncle was chatting to her grandmother, the while he rocked himself continually in his rocking-chair which always reminded him a little of his canoe. Alma was removing some barley-cakes from the oven and putting the finishing touches to the supper. Beyond the stove stood the wood-box, and next to that the water-barrel. Between the north-west corner and the door a mirror hung on the wall, with a white horn comb beside it on two nails, while on a shelf beneath it was the metal wash-basin.

On the right of the door, another window afforded a view of the hills in the south-east, still bright with the slanting rays of the sun, and, beyond them, a sky of pale-blue and greyish-mauve. On the south side of the room, in front of the third window, stood the long table, now covered with glistening white oilcloth and laden with earthenware or tinned iron plates and wide terra-cotta dishes enamelled with blue flowers, on which pork and vegetables were steaming. Nipsya glanced at them out of the corner of her eye every time she turned her head, wondering what unknown foods she would find there. Her stomach was forever "crying 'cupboard'."

The remaining article of furniture was a wooden bed, painted brown, which stood on her left, in the

north-west corner. To Nipsya, it had always looked much less comfortable, with its straw mattress, than pliant spruce-boughs cleverly imbricated like fish-scales. On the west wall, over the head of the bed, hung a black wooden cross and beneath it a large bright-coloured picture of a bearded man with a very kindly face and a very solemn young woman holding a nude babe. The first time that she had seen this picture, Nipsya had questioned Alma about it, but had not much appreciated her cousin's long confusing story. When she had consulted her grand-mother, the latter had replied contemptuously that it was one of the ridiculous inventions of the Black-Robes.

Nipsya took a fresh interest in it to-night, suspecting that there was more in it than she knew. She thought that if the Crees could choose animals as guardian spirits, the white men had just as much right to prefer protectors in human form and with such kind faces. Perhaps it was one of those powerful kings of the old countries across the seas, who could, with one word, seize the lands of the Indians.

"Supper is ready!" said Alma, just then.

The father took the place of authority at the end of the table.

Nipsya ceased to think of anything but the delights of rare or unknown foods: salt pork, fresh peas, new potatoes, lettuce with cream and vinegar,

barley-cakes, sugar, tea, milk, cream, butter, and hens' eggs, which she found even better than the fresh eggs of wild ducks because, here, the addition of salt improved their flavour. But for her grandmother's preliminary warnings, Nipsya would cheerfully have followed the gluttonous customs of her Indian ancestors. Her uncle and Alma, noticing her greediness, encouraged her in it, but her pride, awakened by Vital's mocking and inquisitive eyes, forced her to be moderate.

At the end of the meal, Vital and Alma went out to finish their chores. The old people and Nipsya drew their chairs beside the empty stove, in front of the open north window through which the sun was now shining. On the window-ledge was a white iron box containing chopped tobacco-leaves and from this the old people filled their pipes, and smoked in silence. At last, Cléophas spoke:

"Vital has finished his big stable. It's a fine piece of work, too. But why spend your time building when life's so short and there are so many things to see in the world? And the trouble it gives you! To have to go running about as far as Fort Edmonton for this and that! Five days' journey for a pane of glass that might get broken to-morrow! Or else, he's making the trip to Fort Garry, fifteen hundred miles going and coming, as he did for his cattle, his wagon, his plough, and I don't know what other inven-

tions! It's true, I did quite a bit of running about, myself, but not for the sake of sticking in one hole never to leave it. Vital takes after his grandfather and my brothers—all farmers. We old voyageurs opened up the country: they only open up land."

"*Hunhun!* Times change," muttered the old woman.

Nipsya, who had just tasted some of the results of Vital's work, began to doubt the wisdom of the old people, but her mind was too sluggish for any argument just now. Like a caribou-heifer, chewing the cud beside a forest-stream, she was enjoying the comfort of a well-fed stomach. Indeed, she was even more contented than the caribou, for the atmosphere, heavy with smoke from the pipes and from the smudge-pail before the door, was keeping away the voracious mosquitoes.

When her cousins came in again, their father laid his unfinished pipe on the window-ledge, as Alma said:

"We will have the prayer as usual, father. Afterwards, you can sit up with grandmother. But you must think of going to bed before dark. The night is all too short at this time of the year, and you will have to leave early in the morning."

At once, all three knelt beside the bed, their heads bowed before the cross and the picture, and

Alma recited the evening prayer, the two men uttering occasional responses.

In surprise, Nipsya looked at her grandmother, who solemnly kept on smoking. Nipsya had heard of the white people's prayers, but, as the subject had never interested her, she did not know the meaning of this performance. She wondered if it would be good manners to join them, and could not quite make up her mind. Besides, although she knew the meaning of many of the individual words she was hearing, joined together they made a sense that escaped her; other words she had never heard pronounced except by Monsieur Alec when he was speaking to the voyageurs, and these she did not understand at all.

Anyway, the good supper had made her drowsy. She was glad when, at the end of the prayer, Alma invited her into the other room, where the setting sun was streaming through the north and west windows, and showed her the bed which they were to share. It was on the left of the door, and had a straw mattress and wool blankets. Her grandmother's bed, in the opposite corner, was narrower, and the blankets were of more brilliant colours.

The men slept in the main room.

Chapter VI

LAC SAINTE-ANNE

OWING to her grandmother's activity, Nipsya had lapsed into lazy habits, and was not yet awake when Alma came to shake her, crying:

"Stir yourself, you lazy girl! Breakfast is just about ready. Come and wash!"

Nipsya had only to put on her leggings and moccasins. To finish her toilette, she went to the well-scoured basin, which Alma had filled with clear water, and she was given a very white towel. As she braided her long hair, she studied her reflection in the mirror, and thought the latter a very useful and very pleasing object.

As soon as breakfast was over, her cousin Vital hitched up his best driving-team, their well-oiled harness gleaming in the sun, and when they had been backed in front of the house door, Alma placed on the two-wheeled cart a box of provisions, covered with a white cloth.

"Come on!" cried Cléophas. "Let's climb up! The young people in front, the old people behind! Are the axe and the guns there? Good! Give me a kiss, Alma! If any of your beaux call, make them work hard!"

"Don't worry, father! if any of them come, I'll make them earn what they eat!"

She gave the brightest of the bed-blankets to her grandmother, who wrapped it around herself, not without pride; the long vertical stripes of green and yellow gave her infinite pleasure. Nipsya was given another, with broad bands of red and white; it covered her from shoulders to feet. The canvas tent and a few extra blankets for night use were arranged as cushions on the board seat, and then they were off.

Nipsya enjoyed the rough jolting of the cart from the very first and was particularly happy in being so close to Vital. But her keen eyes were taking in every detail of these new scenes.

The sun was already high in the east. In that part of the country, during the summer nights the temperature often drops almost to freezing-point, and the dew is so heavy that in the mornings every leaf and blade seem to be powdered with stars, as if the luminous dust of the night skies had fallen and settled there as the earth awakened.

Fairly recently, all that rolling country south of the lake had been laid waste by a great fire. Upon the hills, where once had been primitive forest, dense clumps of young poplars and *liards* were growing in the midst of open, grass-covered spaces. Here

and there, on the moister slopes, but more abundantly in the hollows, spruce-trees spread out their branches in regular whorls. Birches, lovers of cool places, upraised their slender branches on trunks which, at that season, were of a delicate flesh tint. Surrounding these clumps, or advancing their solitary sentries, were bushy willows, some ball-shaped, others, with their numerous stems joined at the base and their tops far apart, resembling umbrellas. The bark of their new shoots was of various shades, ranging from pale-yellow to bright red. Their leaves, dull on one side and glossy on the other, threw off myriad glints in the brilliant sunshine. These willows, with their islets and capes of verdure, were forming the first breakwater against the further encroachment of that calm, tenacious, devouring sea of grass whose bright green waves, of uniform depth but infinitely varied in form, were spreading in the open spaces over the vast expanse of that burned land.

Because her name meant "the willows," and because it had been chosen by her mother, Nipsya worshipped these trees with love and reverence. They had souls and habits more diverse, more beneficent, than those of any other living things in the world, man not excepted. It was through them, particularly, that she discerned the bounty and wisdom of the

Supreme Spirit. To vent her anger upon them was her greatest blasphemy.

The trail, having been marked out only by herds of buffalo, moose, or caribou, or by Indians with horses conveying their tent-skins on two poles, and, more recently, by voyageurs and trappers going from one lake to another, was too narrow in places for Vital's cart, and he was obliged to get out and cut down an occasional tree before he could pass. At such times, Nipsya would admire his supple, measured strength, that power in each movement, which so few men or animals possessed; Vital reminded her of both the lynx and the buffalo.

These silent manifestations of her cousin's character made her a little afraid of him, but if she was too timid to ask him questions, she was happy in answering his.

"Are you tired already, Nipsya? It is another twelve miles from here to the Rivière aux Reflets Rouges and seventeen to the Mission."

"No, I am not tired."

"Do you want to come to the Mission?"

"Yes."

He leaned closer and lowered his voice:

"I don't think grandmother will like that very much. But nearly all her old friends are Christians now. I told her she would find them over there. I also asked her if she were afraid of the Black-Robes.

That settled it, last night. And she wants to find out, before the meeting, what the older men think of a battle with the red-coats, for she knows that at the meeting it will be the best speakers who will prevail."

~~Nipsya was grateful to her cousin for his confi-~~dence. He need not have given it to her. He was treating her as a child no longer. Her shyness diminished. She would show him that she could now understand serious matters.

"I think, myself, that the Crees will beat the British."

"Naturally!" Vital replied, laughing. "But what makes you think so?"

"Mahigan tamed Monsieur Alec's cayuse, and no white man had been able to do that. The Crees are brave and clever."

"*Hunhun*! But sometimes that is not enough. Do you know what a cannon is?"

"No," she answered, in some surprise and confusion. "I only know that there are some at Fort Edmonton."

"It is a large gun that sends bullets two or three miles away; the bullets explode and kill several men at a time. The British have a great many of them and we have none at all."

Nipsya was silent, feeling deeply humiliated at this unexpected exposure of her ignorance. She

thought that her grandmother ought to have told her all such things. Also, she was a little annoyed with Vital for so tactlessly wounding her self-respect and was waiting for him to make some amends for his indiscretion. But he had assumed a taciturn and thoughtful expression and seemed not to be bothering about her any longer. Her ill-humour lasted until noon.

By that time, they had reached the Crique aux Bords qui s'Eboulent (the Creek with Crumbling Banks). This is a river which meanders over a small prairie, and its shore is of black spongy earth, so deep that the feet of animals who come there to drink sink as in mud.

"Hobble the horses, first, Vital, while I hold them," said old Lajeunesse.

The young man handed the reins to his father, and then jumped down and bound the horses' front feet, above the fetlock-joint, with rawhide thongs just long enough to allow them to graze but not to gallop or get away. They were then unhitched and allowed their liberty.

With his axe, Vital cut a stout green branch from one of the willows growing along the bank. He left a fork at the top end of it and sharpened the butt. Then he drove it into the ground at an acute angle so that the iron pot, filled with water for the tea, when suspended from the fork, might

get the full blaze of the fire, which Nipsya was making with dry branches. To ensure greater firmness, a second and very short stick was planted vertically beneath the first, to support it by means of a forked crotch.

From the box of provisions, Cléophas had taken a ham, some hard-boiled eggs, and a white loaf of real wheat flour which had been set aside for this journey. While the water was heating, Nipsya and her grandmother took two cups and went in search of strawberries and raspberries. They found, also, on the steep sunny hill down which they had just come, some saskatoon bushes laden with purple berries already nearly ripe.

For the meal, the women squatted on the ground, while the men sat on a dry log.

"My dear," Cléophas remarked to his niece, "for a man, this is the only life worth while—to wander in the good God's lands that civilization hasn't yet spoiled. But it's better still when you don't know the country and have a trusty gun and hunt your own food. Ah! The grand adventures of the old days! . . ."

When Vital had finished his meal, he took his axe and cut down some willows with which to bridge the creek. When the horses had had enough to eat, he hitched them up again.

"And now," said his father, "we will have a fine

bit of road through thick woods, but the flies are much worse there. Here, Nipsya, your legs are young! Take my knife and cut some twigs with plenty of leaves on them to put on the horses' noses. It would be no fun if they bolted."

But Vital was a skilful driver, and by the middle of the afternoon, they had reached the north-east shore of the Lac de l'Esprit Qui Marche sur les Eaux (the Lake of the Spirit That Walks upon the Waters). There, the Indians sometimes saw a human form which glided over the surface toward them, then vanished. The missionaries have named it Lac Sainte-Anne.

From that point, the road was better, running south along the sandy beach. They forded the Rivière aux Reflets Rouges near its source. Several tents were pitched there already, and the population of this ephemeral village was awaiting the event of the day after the morrow. Everybody came forward to welcome the popular Bonhomme, the blazer of trails, and his exploits were recounted.

It was nearly an hour before everyone's curiosity was satisfied and they were allowed to proceed; and then it was a triumphal procession, for when a score of Métis and Indians, who had been hesitating through fear of ridicule, saw Cléophas, Vital, and even the grandmother, bent on going to the Mission, they leaped on their horses and accompanied them

in a tumultuous cavalcade. Nipsya found this escort untimely. Apart from the fact that she no longer had Vital so much to herself, the company included a few bold youths who were too much given to vulgar and suggestive jovialities. She pretended not to notice them, while Vital treated them with indifference, the grandmother with contempt. Cléophas alone answered with lively good nature.

Skirting the south-east end of the lake, they turned east, and at sunset reached the domain of the Black-Robes.

Chapter VII

THE BLACK-ROBES

SUDDENLY, as they emerged from a clump of poplars, Nipsya's young and almost pagan mind sensed the fascination of the white man's religion.

She saw before her, on a slight elevation, a small rectangular church, surmounted by a belfry, and painted white with vertical stripes of pale-blue at the corners. Adjoining it was the Presbytery, built of logs like every other house in that region but revealing a taste for modern style and art. It had the additional embellishment of a garden. Nipsya divined at once that the finer of the two buildings was the house dedicated to the Great Spirit, and this rudimentary architecture of man seemed worthy of her admiration. Just as the sun was disappearing behind the distant Rockies, a low-toned bell tolled the angelus. At once, Vital's face assumed a meditative, solemn expression and the voice of Cléophas ceased. They stood thus for several moments. All their escorts had become silent and were going on slowly, for Vital was a Christian* both feared and

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* Author's Note: "Without wishing to portray in Vital a man of Louis Riel's breadth of intellect, the author has endeavoured to make him true to a type which to-day has disappeared, the type

respected. People were hurrying toward the church door.

That tolling of the bell,—muffled in the woods, louder over the wide expanse of the lake,—was a new experience for Nipsya. Coupled with the men's response, which she had just witnessed, and was still wondering about, it gave her a surprise and the conception of a power both beautiful and gentle. She had always loved to listen to the wind's voice in the trees, in the pines especially, but such music was too subtle: she preferred beautiful human voices, particularly her own. She had also heard the passionate rhythm of drums at Indian dances and liked that primitive art. But this tolling of a bell—a monotone, yet sweet and tuneful,—seemed to her more fraught with feeling and expressive of deep meanings.

Not far from the church, the river, flowing between high, wooded banks to the lake, had suddenly found its shores dotted with numerous tents. And there Nipsya's party settled, also. Her grand-

of the first Métis, but educated and Christian Métis, who were not at all so rare at that period as one might imagine.

"The reader will be disappointed if he is expecting a Western-Canadian Métis of the type so often portrayed by novelists with more thought for the picturesque than for historical truth.

"In the unanimous opinion of those who lived among the Crees—either pure or *métissés*—between the years 1850 and 1885, the Christian converts brought to their religion a zeal approaching asceticism and even, in many cases, fanaticism."

mother disappeared at once in search of the old converts. Cléophas and Vital were surrounded in turn, while willing hands erected their tent: they had nothing to do but rest themselves and chat. Nipsya, squatting on the grass, wrapped in her red-and-white-striped blanket, found herself forsaken. Many people stared at her but, seeing that she was a stranger, did not speak to her. Even the young men were reserved, owing to the proximity of the priests. She gazed at the lake, spangled with the silver, gold, and scarlet of sunset, and then at the meadow where the horses, with their fore feet hobbled, were grazing peacefully, only a few spirited ones rearing and neighing.

At the same time, out of the corner of her eye, she watched the progress of a Black-Robe, who had come out of the church and was approaching gradually, with many a halt among the scattered and constantly-moving crowd. Nipsya had heard enough about the Black-Robes to have a fairly good idea of what they looked like, but only on two occasions had she seen any of them, and then it had been at a distance, as they passed in a canoe on Lac des Aigles. As this one drew nearer, her lively curiosity allowed no detail to escape. She noticed the black robe buttoned from top to bottom, the black girdle, the black wooden crucifix, bordered with bright metal, suspended from his neck, and

the small, square black hat on the thick, grizzled hair. He was plainly a white man, of robust frame. His face had not the stern, haughty expression of a chief's, which she had expected. This man's face was full and ruddy; his eyes, beneath bushy grey eyebrows, were bright and smiling, and blue as the morning skies. Though he spoke loudly, Nipsya could not understand every word owing to this Frenchman's unusual accent. To the "*Bonsoère*" of the Métis he answered: "*Bonsoar.*" But he had a pleasant voice.

He made straight for the Lajeunesse family as soon as he had caught sight of them. Those who were standing near and had already spoken to the priest, moved aside so as not to intrude.

"Ah, Bonhomme Lajeunesse, you old voyageur! So you have taken root on the land? And how are you, Vital?"

He pressed their hands for a moment, while Cléophas replied:

"Ah, Father Lozée, you weren't so fat the last time we met, up north! Have you taken root, too?"

"Yes. I was sent here to convalesce, and now look at me, as overburdened with fat as a bear before wintering! But I will lose that when I start stirring up the district a bit. I even hope to be able to come and say Mass at your house from time to time."

Nipsya had been sitting still, with bent head,

and Father Lozée regarded her with some curiosity.

"That is my niece," said Cléophas, answering his look. "She is a heathen, but she isn't wicked. Come here, Nipsya, and say '*bonsoir*' to monsieur le curé!"

She got up and took the priest's outstretched hand.

"Would you like me to baptize you, my child? It wouldn't take long."

"Wait! Wait!" said Cléophas. "If her grandmother hears of it, I am not so sure how she will take it."

"I think," said Vital, "it would be better for Nipsya to know something about our religion first, and be baptized of her own accord."

"What!" the priest exclaimed. "Is she still such a heathen as that? Your own niece and cousin! It is about time I stirred up this district a bit, and you people first!"

"Indeed?" said Cléophas. "Wait until her grandmother catches you! Of course, if Nipsya were willing, her grandmother wouldn't say anything. She admits that each individual is free. But she wouldn't hear of anyone forcing her grand-daughter any more than herself. We would all suffer for it."

"Look here, my child!" the priest went on. "Would you like to become a Christian?"

"I don't know; I think I would."

"Fine! We will see about it. You look to me like a good girl."

After exchanging a few more words with the Lajeunesse family, he went toward other groups.

Nipsya thought the Black-Robe had broached the subject rather quickly, but that, otherwise, his manners were not displeasing. Why she had intimated that she might like to become a Christian, she had no clear idea. Was it that she had not wanted to pain this Father Lozée because he looked so kind; and, also, because such a reply did not bind her to anything? Or was it that, deep in her heart, she had hoped thus to be brought closer to Vital? She understood very little of this new religion; she did not know whether she could believe it or not. In that case, had she better pretend to accept it? Without believing it? Yes; that might be just as good. But what would her grandmother say about it? At this stage in her thoughts, she shrugged her shoulders slightly, as if to shake off a controlling hand that was becoming too tiresome.

On all sides, men and women were carrying armfuls of dry wood. Nipsya followed her cousin and helped him bring back their provisions. Soon, numerous spirals of smoke were curling upward from among the tents, forming a light fog which rolled toward the lake. Nipsya's grandmother returned for supper, but afterwards devoted herself to her pipe. Nipsya remained beside her while the two men,

with the majority of the other people, went into the church to pray.

The opposite shore of the lake could scarcely be seen through the dusk.

"Look, Nipsya!" said her grandmother, suddenly. "The spirit walking upon the water!"

Nipsya, always interested in such manifestations of the invisible beings, observed carefully a sort of eddy, light as smoke or mist, gliding away over the now slate-coloured surface of the water. She could not make out a human form clearly, but thought, without any great conviction, that possibly it might be the spirit of the lake. In another moment, the apparition had melted away.

Far into the night, men and women sat chatting around the fires, beneath a pall of reddish smoke. Nipsya, if rather tired after her journey, was quietly happy because she was sitting beside Vital and because they were to sleep in the same tent. She was thinking vaguely that this Christian gathering was not much different from other gatherings: it was merely more peaceful.

Chapter VIII

"FOREIGN MAGIC"

THE next morning, when she was awakened by the chiming of the bell, she found her uncle and cousin absent. Her grandmother explained sarcastically that they had gone to confess all their bad deeds to the Black-Robes and to eat the Great Spirit. Nipsya, knowing that it would be useless to ask further questions, turned her attention to her breakfast; but she noticed, when the men returned, that they looked very solemn, yet happy and kind.

In the middle of the morning, the bell rang a second time, and everyone moved toward the church. Even the grandmother did not disdain to watch the rites of the Black-Robes, which she had never yet seen. She remained near the door and kept her granddaughter beside her, not only because she was a little suspicious of this "foreign magic," but because there, they were in more familiar company. The Cree Christians were less bold than the white people and the Métis: whereas the latter would always go up to the front, the former would remain near the entrance and, if there were neither chairs nor benches there, would sit back on their heels, or, as the majority of the women did, would squat on

the floor with their legs crossed beneath them. In this position, which a white man could not endure for long, an Indian can remain for hours.

Nipsya was astonished at the art of civilized man. In a setting of familiar flowers, the white and gold of the altar, the tall lighted candles, the small red lamp hanging by slender brass chains, with a tiny flame flickering within it, the blue and white statue of a woman above the altar, also the large wooden crucifix, filled her with as much curiosity as admiration. Then there were the quaint but beautiful vestments of the Black-Robes, who were now transformed into white and gold personages. And soon, there were hymns, accompanied by peals both sweeter and stronger than those of the bell. All this plunged her into an ecstasy of wonder until her throat contracted as if she might weep. Cessation of the music would bring her back to earth and she would wait impatiently for it to begin again.

Father Lozée and another Black-Robe spoke in turn, the one in Cree, the other in French. Nipsya, at first annoyed at this interruption of the hymns, suddenly became interested in the Cree discourse. It was a story, simply told, and astonishing, too; but what surprised her most was that a white man should be able to use the Indian language with such command and eloquence. Now and then, he made

slips, which she noticed not without malice; all the same, it was interesting.

Her mind grew more and more active; her thoughts flowed more and more freely. As she listened, a multitude of new ideas came to her. She would have liked to argue and, occasionally, to contradict. At other moments, she was deeply stirred, and when the speaker pointed to the large crucifix and related how the Man had died, she felt strangely agitated. She was not sure that it was really true, but if it were just a story, it was quite the best one she had ever heard. She was not surprised to see those around her—even the men—weeping.

In order to learn more, she tried to follow the words of the other priest, who spoke in French; but they were interspersed with too many expressions unknown to her or little-used by her.

When the chanting recommenced, a tranquil joy took possession of her again and she gave herself up to it completely. It mattered little to her that the words were in a foreign language.

When the Mass was over, she had not had enough, and was amazed, when she got outside, to see not only the children but many of the grown-ups looking pleased to be out in the open again. Even Vital dared to tease her about her rapt expression.

"Are you converted already, cousin?" he asked her.

"No. But I liked that music so much."

"You may have some more this afternoon, if you like. Let's go and eat!"

Immediately after the meal, Father Lozée came looking for Vital. Nipsya watched them go into the garden and sit down in front of the Presbytery with two other Black-Robes and a few Métis and Indian chiefs.

"They are talking about Riel," said her uncle, "and their titles to the land, and about the red-coats, and the battle which is almost sure to come. I don't blame them, but I am not so excited about it as Vital and all the others who own land."

"*Hunhun*!" said the grandmother. "We can't let the white men take everything from us!"

"Of course not," the old man agreed, "and there is only one way to deal with the English and that is to do what Louis-Joseph Papineau and William Lyon Mackenzie did in Lower Canada, when I was a lad, and what Louis Riel did at Red River in '69. The English respect only the strong. But if people had gone on trading in furs, as we did, the Government of Lower Canada would never have thought of seizing the land in the North-West and would have had no need to coop up the Indians in reserves, either. Oh, well! What will be, will be! Only the Indians and the voyageurs knew how to live without grabbing everything that came their way. To-

morrow, there will be no more free men. Each newcomer will settle on his own clod of earth and spend all his time looking after it and defending it against others. And he will get as rich as he can by swallowing up those smaller than himself. Ah, yes, mother! For us, the days of freedom and adventure are over!"

"*Hunhun*! Don't be too sure of that! The old people think we still have a chance with Riel."

"Bah! Not for long. It will end here as it did in the States, down there to the south. You know quite well, mother, that even the Sioux, who are fine fighters—don't be offended!—lost the game in the end. What is left to them now?"

"Bonhomme, in this case, the Crees won't be alone. The Métis will fight with us."

They went on with their argument, Nipsya only half-listening to them. She would have liked it better if they had discussed the rites and speeches of the mass. She was longing to question her uncle, but it was not proper for young people to put themselves on a level with their elders and, furthermore, she was afraid of starting a quarrel. She was waiting impatiently for her cousin's return, but the group of men in the Presbytery garden, who seemed to be having a very animated discussion, did not break up until the bell again summoned everybody to church.

Her grandmother did not get up, and Nipsya dared not follow her uncle by herself. Such restraint, imposed upon her this time by habit rather than by respect or affection, secretly angered her, and when she caught the muffled, far-off sound of the harmonium and the chanting, she was angrier still. She gave no sign of it, however, except that she kept her head bent and her hands pressed tightly together between her knees. But her grandmother could read these signs.

"Are you wanting to go over there?" she asked.

"It is too late now."

"You like the ways of the Black-Robes, child. Are you going to listen to them?"

"I like their music," Nipsya replied. "I don't know if what they say is true."

"It is not true."

"But many people say it *is* true," declared her grand-daughter.

"Nipsya, you are almost a woman. You no longer listen to your grandmother. But you are free. I can not keep you with me forever. You are like the moose-heifer that hears the lonely male calling in the forest. You want to leave me."

"No, grandmother! Not yet. I do not want to leave you. Can't you see I am staying with you?"

"Not willingly, though."

"Yes. . . . Now I am. Don't scold me any more, grandmother. It is not my fault."

"No," said the old woman, more gently, "it is not your fault. It is the fault of the times."

"We will stay together always, grandmother."

"Perhaps, my child. There is no telling what may happen."

Just then, the church door opened. A burst of chanting came through it. A man in a white surplice was carrying a brass cross, and behind him came Vital bearing a large blue-and-white banner with embroidered golden figures that glinted in the sun. They moved slowly, followed by a long procession of people, walking four abreast, the men first, bareheaded, and the women behind them. They were all chanting as they walked, describing a large curve on the meadow, between the sombre forest and the broad, sunlit lake. The majority of the men wore fringed leather garments, with turned-down collars, sleeves, and cuffs trimmed with tiny, multi-coloured beads, while many of the women wore bright-coloured dresses, red and purple predominating.

Nipsya was admiring this spectacle. She was a little surprised at such quiet orderliness, but it seemed to fit in with the chanting, which was varied without confusion, hearty and yet tranquil. She was vaguely conscious of a strong sense of unity such as

she had never before noticed in any other crowd.

At the very end of the procession, behind the boys and girls, two surpliced Black-Robes escorted Father Lozée, who wore a flowing cloak of white and gold. He was carrying a small radiating sun with a snow-white centre. Nipsya supposed that it must be the same small white disc before which all heads had bowed during the Mass, and she concluded that, in some way, it must symbolize the Great Spirit.

The priests looked as if they were rapt in contemplation and saw nothing, which surprised Nipsya very much. She had always thought that the Black-Robes were very authoritative persons, who directed everything, as at the Mass. But just now, they seemed to have no hand in the affair at all, yet everybody walked in order.

Upon reaching the middle of the meadow, the people formed a semi-circle about a wooden platform decorated with red and white streamers and supporting an altar. As Father Lozée went up and placed the small golden sun on the altar, a more solemn chant was sung, but when, with a scarf covering his hands, he took it up again, there was a deep silence and all heads were bowed. Nipsya saw him raise that symbol of the Great Spirit and slowly and solemnly make the sign of the cross in the air, and over the people, the meadow, the forest, the lake, and the entire district.

Then, in the same order, the procession wended its way back to the church.

After watching these spectacles, to her so novel and beautiful, Nipsya felt impatient because she could not at once grasp their meaning. It seemed to her that, inasmuch as she had watched, thought, and felt, so intensely, her mind was still marked with the sign of the cross; and yet, she had no key at all to this haunting symbol. What would Vital think of such stupid ignorance—he who not only knew all about the new religion, but even knew the old one far better than she did? Why had she remained so long indifferent to these new thoughts that made men do such lovely things and awakened such sweet emotions?

After the evening meal, Vital sat with her for a moment beside the fire, on which green branches had been laid in order that the thick smoke might drive away the mosquitoes that rose at twilight.

"Well, Nipsya," he said, "what do you think of the Christian religion?"

"It is really beautiful; but there are many things that I do not understand."

"That is a candid confession!" he said, smiling.

"Candid? What does 'candid' mean? You are always making fun of me!"

"Oh, no! 'Candid' means 'open', 'frank'. It is a compliment."

"Won't you teach me your religion, Vital?" she asked, her eyes a little wistful.

"It is quite simple: always do the best you know, the best you can."

She looked puzzled, and remarked:

"In that case, an Indian may be a Christian."

"Yes, in spirit."

"Then why all these new ways of the Black-Robes?"

"Those are only the means to an end," he explained, adding: "But it's a whole course of catechism you are asking for!"

"Catechism? Why do you use such big words? Why don't you answer in Cree?"

"Cree is a beautiful language and I don't look down upon it, but it can't express all the new ideas clearly. Why shouldn't you learn to speak French better?"

"I am quite willing," she said, "but just now, I am anxious to know the meaning of all I have seen."

Then Vital gave in to her curiosity, although he was somewhat suspicious of her eagerness. When he had answered quite a number of questions, he said:

"Nipsya, you are not so anxious to understand the Christian religion as to know what *I* think of it. Why?"

She was taken aback for a moment. Yes, that was

true. Vital could see through everything. She perceived at once that she wanted, above all else, to make her soul like his. Yet she could not commit herself to a too exact confession.

"Because you know more about it than I do."

"On this subject, cousin, neither my opinion nor yours matters at all. These things have been studied for a long, long time, and they are still being studied by a great many good and wise men."

"Do you have to believe everything that the Black-Robes say?"

"Oh, no! Only when they speak as the entire Church."

It would have required nothing less than a complete course of history to satisfy Nipsya's curiosity on the subject of the Church, for to be close to Vital and hear him speak to her seriously was such a sweet and happy experience.

But two grey nuns came up and interrupted their conversation to ask after Alma. When they learned that Nipsya was Alma's cousin, they took her across the bridge to the other side of the river, to visit the school and the convent.

As a wild bee, discovering for the first time the delights of a newly-planted garden, overburdens itself with pollen and becomes intoxicated with nectar from unfamiliar flowers, so Nipsya came back with her mind laden with the pollen-dust of ideas.

Added to those other ideas which she had gathered since morning, they made such a rich, confused mass that she could neither reject nor absorb them. They caused a kind of fever which kept her awake for a long time, that night.

But, unknown to herself, her heart, rather than her brain, was making a particular kind of honey from the pollen of the immortal and varied blossoms of human thought.

Chapter IX

LOUIS RIEL'S CAUSE

IN the middle of the east shore of the Lac de l'Esprit Qui Marche sur les Eaux, a river has hollowed out a bed in the sandy plain. At its mouth it is wide and not very deep, but farther east, where the horizon is broken by hills, it narrows and flows between steep banks. There, moment by moment, hour by hour, day after day, century after century, the impeded, churning waters are carving out a narrow bed of ever-increasing depth between two high cliffs of crumbling earth, which are so steep that in the rainy season their edges collapse in places. Still farther east, this river spreads itself over an immense prairie in numerous quiet, meandering streams, and then flows on again for some sixty miles, until it reaches the North Saskatchewan River which bears it to Lake Winnipeg and thence to Hudson's Bay. Because of the abundance of sturgeon near the confluence of this river with the North Saskatchewan, the voyageurs called it Sturgeon River. But because of the numerous red-branched willows growing upon its shores, the Crees had first called it La Rivière aux Reflets Rouges (the River of Red Reflections). It was along this

capillary vein of the continent that civilization made its invasion from the east.

From east to west, the surface of the lake was shadowed by a veil of monotonous grey clouds, and between these two grey expanses gulls were flying, beating the still air heavily with their long slender wings and mingling their shrill cries with the innumerable voices of other lake birds hidden in the reeds or scattered over the vast, motionless mirror where they made shining furrows that were quickly effaced.

Near the source of the Rivière aux Reflets Rouges, and north of the place where men and animals forded it, there was a meadow bordered with century-old trees. At the edge of this meadow, beneath the grey skies, a noisy crowd of human beings were erecting a large square tent, roofed with skins, and inside this tent a smaller, conical one.

A little before noon, the cart carrying Nipsya and her relatives forded the river. They were going a little farther on, in a north-westerly direction, intending to camp on the sandy shore of the lake for their meal. North and south of the ford, many other fires had been kindled and their smoke was mounting straight up until it blended with the still greyness of the sky.

The meadow where stood the large square tent

was soon dotted with animated groups. Someone asked Vital for the loan of his cart to serve as a platform for the speakers, and it was dragged along by hand.

Nipsya with her grandmother, Cléophas with Vital, joined the groups in the meadow. Though the large majority were Métis, there were numerous Crees. The white men were few and all of them were old voyageurs, who, like Cléophas, had not been able to make up their minds to return to the land of their childhood, where they would have found life too cramped and monotonous.

Nipsya was noticed at once by the young men, and among them she met Mahigan again, and his brother Mistatim. The latter was called Albert by the Métis because a Black-Robe had recently christened him Albert when he had married a young Indian woman who was already a Christian. Nipsya had heard of them occasionally and she recognized Mistatim and his young wife as two of her neighbours who had wept at the story of the crucifixion on the previous evening. She thought that the young bride, with her soft dark eyes, seemed very timid, and that she pressed closer to her husband when Mahigan came near. When the men gathered in the middle of the meadow, she followed Nipsya and her grandmother to join the other women, who, with the chil-

dren were forming a circle behind the men. The majority of the women squatted.

Meanwhile, Vital had been elected, almost unanimously, to preside over the gathering. In the centre of that noisy crowd he mounted the cart and stood there, waiting. There was no need for him to request silence. . . . He chose the Cree language:

"My friends, we are here to consider whether we, in our turn, ought to do what our brothers in Manitoba did fifteen winters ago, to make the English and the Government of Lower Canada respect our rights in the North-West Territories. Our fathers remember, and have told us, that while their brothers, the voyageurs, were profitably but honestly trading the furs of this region for the useful things which they carried with them, the traders in England were being given all our land by the Kings and Queens of England as if they were the owners of it. I am not going to speak of all the injustices which they have committed, or of the greed they have shown in their trading, or of the harm they have done with the fire-water that drives men mad, or of the diseases they have brought, or the vices they have taught us. To-day, the English and the friends of the Ottawa Government are coming almost as far as this, seizing the best portions of our land. Over there, to the south, they are building a railway for carts that go by themselves and vomit fire and smoke. Soon they will be able to

go from the ocean in the east to the ocean in the west. For that railway, too, they are seizing a large portion of the country and giving it to their friends. Our Blackfeet brothers and the Blood Indians think it would be wise to destroy that work before it is finished, but they are yet undecided.

"I am too young to have the wisdom of the old chiefs, but many of them honour me with their confidence, and the majority of you have elected me to preside. So I will give you my opinion. Afterwards, the wise men can point out where I was right and where I was wrong.

"We should do all we can to avoid a quarrel. It would be a difficult matter to drive out the British forever by war. We might recruit thirty thousand men, perhaps, but we have little ammunition and no cannons. So it would be better to come to an understanding. We cannot recognize the Hudson's Bay Company's rights to all the land, nor can we allow our country to be taken over entirely by the Queen of England or her Ottawa Government. But we could leave the Hudson's Bay Company and the British their portion, if they would recognize our rights to our own lands and our right to self-government. We have influential friends working for us, even among the English.

"Many of you are acquainted with Louis Riel and all of you have heard of this chief, who, in spite of

his defeat, obtained so much for our brothers in Manitoba. As you know, I have seen him several times and I may tell you to-day that he is ready to organize another uprising, if peaceful methods are not promptly successful. Our brothers at Batoche have sent for him to help them and he arrived in triumph at Saint-Laurent nearly three weeks ago.

"He is well aware that, this time, if he is taken, he will have little chance of escaping death, but he feels sure of early successes that will be important enough to scare the Government and force them to give us justice.

"Over on the prairies, Gabriel Dumont, Big Bear, and Poundmaker are determined to fight, if necessary. The Blackfeet and Blood Indians have practically made up their minds to join us. It is for you now to think things over and decide what you want to do."

Nipsya's eyes shone and her heart swelled with pride, as if Vital belonged to her already, as she heard his manly, confident and earnest voice addressing that crowd. But she would have been even more pleased if, in addition to being clear and precise, he had employed the beautiful similes and long turns of eloquence in which Indian chiefs delighted. She knew that he had the ability to employ them and was surprised at his not doing so.

Other speakers took his place. The first was a massive giant, as were many of the first Métis, and Nip-

syà recognized him by his red handkerchief as one of those who had discussed things in the Presbytery garden. He announced that the Black-Robes, particularly Father Lacombe and Father Grandin, had promised to do their utmost to bring more justice into the North-West, and had asked them to have patience.

He was succeeded by Mahigan, who, calmly yet forcefully, denounced the Black-Robes as the prime cause of everything that had happened because they had taken all the fight out of the warriors. It was quite time that they were all driven out, along with the Hudson's Bay people and all the white settlers. The majority greeted his words with hisses, while a few, mostly Indians, applauded him. The numerous dogs, which the Indians always take along with them, were doing their best to add to the uproar, and Vital was obliged to mount the cart in order to obtain for the speaker the liberty to express his opinion.

Many others followed, dealing chiefly with their own misfortunes and personal grievances. The last speaker was an old Cree chief, dressed in great splendour for the occasion, who had come all the way from the fountain-heads of the Athabasca. Nipsya thought him very handsome with his head-dress of eagle-plumes, his necklace of grizzlies' claws, and his clothes of very white skins, which were more elaborately trimmed and embroidered than any others she

had ever seen. He spoke at great length, with an eloquence that was quite florid with imagery. He recalled the times of his fathers and of his own youth, when buffalo had covered the eastern plains, when the forest buffalo had not yet fled into the north: he had seen large herds of them on the shores of that same lake. Pigeons, wild turkeys, and geese had been as numerous as the leaves of the trees, as the needles of the pine. The Indians in those days had killed only for food and clothing. But since the white men had begun hunting with guns for the sake of the money which the skins would bring, the Indians' little children were crying with hunger; their tepees, worn thin as cobwebs, no longer protected them from the cold of winter. He believed in the good faith of the Black-Robes, but did not think that the British would listen to them since they were nearly all Frenchmen from overseas. He thought that prudence was necessary, and that nothing ought to be undertaken until the manitou had been consulted, as some of the preceding speakers had already advised.

Meanwhile, the afternoon was advancing. The grey skies had grown darker still, and a fine drizzle had become a steady downpour that soaked through their clothing. This misfortune, and the fact that it was almost meal-time, gradually quenched their enthusiasm. When Vital saw that no one else de-

sired to speak, and that the crowd was beginning to scatter, he mounted the cart again and said:

"My friends, it is quite clear that the majority of you won't refuse to fight if the need should arise. It is quite certain that we can not go to war to-day or to-morrow. It is for Louis Riel, with his wider experience, to say when we must all be ready. So I shall merely ask those who have quite made up their minds, to come to my tent after supper and we will reckon up the number of men and rifles that will be available if Louis Riel should call us to battle."

With a last burst of applause, the meeting broke up.

At the edge of the meadow, in the shelter of the large square tent, another crowd was collecting. This second crowd, if it was less animated than the Métis gathering, looked more colourful beneath the sombre sky, with the red, pink, white, green, brown, and purple of the women's clothing and blankets, and the glass bead-trimmings on the men's apparel. Hither Nipsya was taken by her grandmother to watch the consultation with the manitou.

The man who had been voted most competent to consult the manitou was squatting before the opening of the small conical tent. His face was painted red and white. His feet and wrists were securely bound. In an attitude of contemplation, he was hold-

ing the manitou, a tough skin, inflated and filled with lead pellets or tiny pebbles, and mounted on a short stick. Behind him was a buffalo skull, with a cord of moose-sinew attached to each horn, the other ends of the cords being knotted around two knives stuck into the ground.

The women were ranged on one side, the men on the other. Several of them had drums and sticks and had struck up a slow, plaintive modulation, shrill-toned and strongly accented.

Suddenly, Nipsya saw Mahigan appear, naked except for a piece of supple, whitened leather attached to a belt in front, passed between his thighs, and attached to the belt again at the back; he began the "Dance that Propitiates the Spirit."

He was of medium build and splendidly proportioned. His muscles swelled and rolled beneath his pale bronze skin, throwing into relief every movement of his body and his strong, lithe limbs. The rhythm of the chant was quickened. At times, his voice blended with it in words and cries of invocation. For a long time, he leaped up and down in growing exaltation, then stopped suddenly, apparently exhausted, and sat down on the ground. The drums resumed their slow, passionate rhythm. Mahigan seemed to be swooning.

Suddenly, he assumed an expression of ecstasy and stood up again. Quietly, and in time with the chant,

he moved toward the man with the manitou, and stood near him, staring for a long time at the buffalo skull. Then, deliberately snatching up the two knives with the cords attached, and thrusting them into his thighs, he resumed the "Dance that Propitiates the Spirit," slowly at first, then quickening the rhythm more and more, so that the buffalo skull danced behind him with each movement, until at last the knives were jerked from his lacerated flesh.

At once, the man whose feet and wrists were bound, threw the manitou inside the conical tent and crawled after it on elbows and knees. Suddenly, those outside heard the manitou shaken violently until it sounded like the muffled tones of a hundred small bells, while the same man who had gone in, bound, was heard dancing and chanting an invocation to his guardian spirit.

The whole crowd stood silent, listening.

The manitou stopped rattling. A great silence fell, scarcely broken by the light pattering of rain on the skins that roofed the large tent. Suddenly, the listeners heard what sounded like a flock of swans crying in the distance and coming from the east. They seemed to come ever nearer in a straight line while the sounds grew in volume, until it seemed that the swans were passing right over the tent. Several people rushed outside to see this peculiar manifestation of

the manitou, for swans did not fly in flocks at that season. But nobody could discover anything in the sky and nothing more was heard.

Then, the man with the manitou emerged from the conical tent, freed from his bonds, streaming with perspiration, foaming at the mouth, and with bloodshot eyes; trembling all over, he declared:

"I saw the spirit coming from where the sun rises, in the form of a large flock of white swans, and their voices said that our brothers in the east were calling us and that the spirit bade us go."

Nipsya's grandmother enjoyed these bloody and mysterious spectacles and never missed one. As for Nipsya, they had taught her a certain respect for religion and the meaning of sacrifice. She had always found them interesting and hitherto had approved of them, without having any particular fondness for them. But now she felt that they had less attraction for her.

For one thing, she had seen only a very few Métis there. She now guessed the reason. She knew quite well that if Vital had been there, he would have looked on with his tolerant smile. Besides, being there without him made it less pleasant. Mahigan had captivated her for a moment with his beautiful body and his courage. And yet, though she was hardy, herself, and used to such customs, that stoicism in self-im-

posed torture evoked her compassion rather than her admiration. She felt that it was prompted not so much by religious fervour as by a rather puerile pride.

They went back to the Lajeunesse tent, where Vital was receiving the Métis, first, in groups. When Nipsya saw him entering information in a little book, just as Monsieur Alec did behind his counter, and asking short, rapid questions without the slightest gesture, and when, after the meal, she heard him tell her grandmother the number of men and rifles that had been promised, she found all her ideas about war upset. She had to admit to herself that her cousin had performed, quietly, a more practical piece of work than that of Mahigan and the man with the manitou, but she could not understand how men could thus make up their minds to fight without first rousing themselves to it by fine speeches and impressive ceremonies. She had not much faith in their "On my honour!" spoken heartily but without any other fine phrases. But her uncle, who had told her the name of each man that had come forward, and had narrated the exploits of the outstanding ones, had not seemed to doubt them. He had said to all of them, for none had left the tent without greeting him:

"It is a pity my old legs aren't any good now! I would have helped you."

More often than not, they had replied:

"Take a rest, Bonhomme! Take a rest! You have certainly earned yours!"

Nipsya had preferred the Indian delegates, who had come last and made wonderful speeches. She was quite sure that these men would not break their promises, but would fight like wounded moose.

As she was falling asleep to the patter of rain on the tent-roof, Nipsya made this discovery: that if Vital asked her to follow him over there to the prairies, she would do it without any hesitation, without one word, even. That was not quite the same thing, perhaps, but did it not prove that one could make a great resolve without making a great speech about it?

During the night, she was wakened by loud voices in the distance, sounds of singing, then brawling, coming from the other side of the ford.

"H'm!" said Cléophas, "some cursed trading scoundrel must have sold them a few bottles. A little drop does no harm; but those poor fellows can't stop while there is any left."

Chapter X

A NEW LIFE

IN the morning, the sky was clear. They started early, being anxious to reach home before noon. Nipsya found Vital in a pensive mood and disinclined to talk to her, but she did not mind that so long as she was close to him. Her uncle, on the other hand, was hardly ever silent. Nipsya found his talk very interesting, for he could express great experiences and broad ideas in everyday terms.

Meanwhile, she busied herself watching for all the landmarks and every *personality* among the trees that she had noticed on the way out, correcting errors of memory and picking up again things she had forgotten.

As the wind was asleep on this particular morning, the leaves remained wet for a long time and glistened in the sunlight. After the previous day's rain and gloom, the squirrels, ermines, rabbits, crows, partridges, and all the winged folk, seemed intoxicated with joy.

Vital urged on the horses, and the Crique aux Bords qui s'Eboulent was crossed, without a halt, before the middle of the morning. A little farther on, they were overtaken by Mahigan on horseback. His

bare legs were swathed in blood-stained bandages, his eyes heavy with drunkenness and lack of sleep. He followed them for three miles before turning west, on to the broad Prairie aux Oignons (Onion Prairie), bristling with charred logs and stumps, where he had made his home.

After crossing the last hills, dotted with young trees, Nipsya's party saw the waters of the Lac des Aigles gleaming like the scaly belly of a fish, and then, at the turn of a last grove, the big white house.

As they drove up to it, Alma rushed out to meet them with a thousand questions.

"Wait! Wait!!" cried the Bonhomme. "Let us get down first! Have you anything for us to eat? Did you see all your beaux?"

"Dinner is ready. Noël Courtepatte came by here last night: it was he who told me you would be back this morning. Of course, my beaux came as soon as you had gone. They did the chores and we played cards, so the time hasn't seemed too long to me."

"That's fine!" said her father. "Well, as soon as Vital has unhitched the horses, we will eat, and then we'll tell you the ins and outs of all that happened."

In the house they found two tall blond youths: they were Pierre and Paul Langlois, two brothers who had arrived recently from Quebec. The Bonhomme persuaded them to stay to dinner. Alma, who was amused by their city manners, teased them con-

tinually, and often even took advantage of their politeness. They, for their part, took their revenge on the shyness of Nipsya, who was so dazzled by their refinement and polished speech that she seldom ventured to answer them. She envied Alma her self-possession and roguery; above all, she was wishing that she could attempt some of her cousin's smart sayings to penetrate Vital's indifference.

At the end of the meal, Cléophas and the old woman sat by the north window to smoke their pipes and chat. Vital went out, and the two brothers soon left for home, three miles away. Then Alma took her cousin to see the improvements on the farm.

To the south-east was the hen-house, built of logs, where the barred Plymouth Rocks roosted at night after being scattered in all directions since sunrise; and beside it was the pig-pen, where twelve little black pigs were being fattened on boiled barley, vegetables, and wild peas: they were the first pigs that Nipsya had ever seen.

Then Alma had her admire the fifteen cows as they lay peacefully chewing the cud, protected from the flies by the acrid smoke from the smudge—a smouldering fire of half-rotten wood covered with a layer of fresh straw-manure: it was enclosed by a triple row of poles with a strong stake at the four corners, to keep the animals from scorching their feet. Five young oxen, not yet trained to the yoke,

fled at Nipsya's approach, as if terrified of this bold stranger. The horses, less sensitive to the flies, were grazing under some young poplars, not far away.

The stable, due south of the big white house and almost as large, echoed with the blows of Vital's axe as he made the last stall of strong poplar poles. Nipsya looked on with interest for a long time, meanwhile admiring the floor, made with poplars split in two and placed side by side with the flat side uppermost, also the ceiling, fashioned like the floor and supporting the hayloft. At the end of two hours, when he had finished his job, Vital condescended to accompany the two girls.

South-west of the house, there was a three-walled building that was quite open on the south side. This served as winter-quarters for the oxen and the sheep.

North of this building, the garden stretched to the steep lake bank. It occupied almost two acres and was well-fenced with poplar poles, superposed in zigzag fashion, with the ends one on top of another, this arrangement requiring neither stakes nor nails. Several tillings had made the good, black, sandy soil very light. Two-thirds of it was reserved for barley, the remainder for vegetables, including potatoes. Nipsya had long been familiar with potatoes, but the other vegetables were all new to her. Addressing herself always to Vital, she was never done asking questions.

"I got the seeds," he said, "from the Saint-Albert Mission, from one of the Oblate Fathers who had just come from France. He gave me some directions, too, which were equally valuable. In a garden, if the new soil is well tilled, you can grow good potatoes and fairly good vegetables of other varieties for several years, but if you spread it with stable-manure, the results are even better."

A shot on the lake interrupted him.

"Father is shooting ducks. You must not have eaten them very often at grandmother's. You shall taste all our good things during the haying—unless you want to go back home?"

"Oh, no!"

"You are a bit of a glutton, I think," he said, smiling.

"Yes," she admitted, "but I would stay even if there weren't much to eat."

She regarded him ingenuously, then blushed beneath his penetrating look and lowered her eyes. She fancied that she had seen a tenderness in his such as he had never revealed before. However, he was silent, and she trembled a little. Finally, he asked:

"Are you beginning to understand renunciation?"

"I don't know. I am not renouncing anything."

"Perhaps you will understand some day," he said, gently. "You are a good girl at heart."

"Yes; I wish I could understand you, Vital!"

"It isn't me you must try to understand, but life, which is of more importance than any man. I don't count. I may die to-morrow."

Yes, that was true, she reflected. She recalled her meditations of the previous week, when the image of Death had mingled occasionally with the images of Life. But just now, she was not interested in anything that was not of the immediate present. Her cousin was very much alive; he wouldn't be likely to die for many years, and she was anxious to see inside his mind; but she durst not tell him that. Alma came and rescued her from her silence. She had come from the far end of the garden with an armful of weeds—pigweed and wild mustard, that had come from Europe with the barley and oats. She threw them over the fence to the waiting sheep.

"You lazy creatures!" she exclaimed. "Can't you work with your arms as well as with your tongues?"

"If you would like to change jobs with me, Alma, you can break in my oxen to-morrow," Vital replied.

"No, thanks! I would much rather weed my garden."

However, Vital helped her, and Nipsya did, too, and found, when she got to the end of one cleared row, that work shared with Vital was interesting. She noticed, too, that it gave the garden a neat appearance and a pattern more striking than the subtle harmony of wild vegetation.

The supper which their grandmother had prepared without asking anyone's permission, was a triumph.

"There is no denying it: grandmother has the knack," Alma confessed.

"I told you so, my girl," said Cléophas. "Nobody can beat mother at cooking. There are no more cooks like her to-day. Try that white fish, Nipsya, and those slices of pork! Don't pay any attention to Vital! He is all for mortifications and penances. Let him fast! What I say is that if the good Lord made good things, it wasn't to have them wasted!"

Nipsya, who was familiar with the long fasts practised among the Indians, knew quite well that her uncle was joking and that Vital was not fasting, for he was eating with a good enough appetite, but she surmised that her cousin was avoiding excess. Perhaps that was what he called "renunciation." Well, that was easy, and she must show him.

"I have had sufficient, uncle. I don't wish any more."

Watching her cousin's mocking eyes, she saw a flash of surprise that was quickly concealed, but it was enough for her.

"Is that really true?" Vital asked then. "Couldn't you swallow a little more of that strawberry pie?"

"Yes, I could if I wished," she admitted, "but I don't want any more."

"That is splendid! You seem to be on the road to

perfection. But everything depends upon your motive."

Nipsya was not quite sure what he meant, or whether he were speaking seriously or still making fun of her. She was silent.

"Look here, Vital!" said Alma. "Why are you forever teasing her? She can't become a saint in a day!"

"Of course she can not. I don't expect her to. I am only trying to help her a bit in my own way."

"Yours is a hurting way," his sister retorted.

"Yes, but perhaps it's the best way for me. What do you say, Nipsya?"

"I don't understand," she said, hopelessly. "I don't know what a saint is. But I don't like being made fun of, especially when I try to do right."

His expression softened.

"Don't think that I am making fun of you, cousin. I know I like to tease, but one can do that without ridicule. You are always so grave and serious, while I am just an overgrown child. Perhaps, as I get older I shall grow as serious as you!"

Nipsya resigned herself to silence, for it was impossible to argue with Vital. She contented herself with the thought that if his words were often like needles, he never pricked her very hard: the pricks went no deeper than her skin and, after all, were not unpleasant.

During these skirmishes, Cléophas looked on with an indulgent expression; the grandmother remained impassive.

As soon as supper was over, Vital and Alma invited their cousin to come and watch them milk the cows near the smudge. Nipsya took a particular fancy to a handsome, reddish-brown animal because it allowed her to come close and touch it without pausing in its chewing of the cud, or flapping away the mosquitoes with its ears and tail; so she went back to the house for a pail. Bending forward like Alma, with her head in the hollow of the cow's flank because of the switching of its tail, and holding the pail on the slant between her knees, she tried to squeeze the milk from the heavy udder. Vital's teasing remarks did not dishearten her at all, this time. She accepted them as a necessary evil like mosquito-bites, and besides, they were interspersed with practical advice.

After a little perseverance, she heard the spurts of milk reverberating in her milk pail as in those of her cousins. But her fingers and wrists were growing tired, and Vital, who noticed everything, came and finished the task.

"That is not so bad for a beginner," he said. "The first time I did it, it took me three hours to dry my cow. I couldn't move my fingers any longer."

As Vital's compliments were rare, Nipsya felt very proud. Perhaps, also, he was satisfied because she

had borne his railleries good-naturedly. She went with him to the stable, to watch him give some of the warm milk to the young calves. When they went back to the house, they poured the remainder through a white cloth into a large, deep pail. Then Vital suspended the pail in a well near the lake, explaining that the cream would rise better there, in the cool temperature.

This *entente cordiale* lasted until prayer-time, when, after hesitating a little beneath her grandmother's impenetrable eyes, her desire to please Vital made her resolve to kneel beside him and imitate his religious rites. He had looked surprised and as if he wanted to speak to her, but had bowed his head again with a solemn expression because Alma, being too prompt, had already made the sign of the cross.

Chapter XI

YOKING THE OXEN

THE next day, shortly after the sun had passed the middle of its course, the country around the Lac des Aigles reflected its oppressive heat in shimmering waves. All Nature was enveloped in a fluid tranquillity.

In the midst of the herd lying near the smudge, the two huge oxen that Vital had selected were peacefully chewing the cud, with half-closed eyes, when, suddenly, two lassoes, thrown silently by Mistatim and Vital, fell over their heads and instantly tightened beneath their horns. In three bounds they were outside the scattered herd, and Mistatim's rope was jerked out of his hand.

"Come and help me!" shouted Vital.

He had pulled up the large grey ox with such a powerful jerk that its horns were brought sharply downward and in its sudden rush the animal drove them into the ground. It turned a somersault and landed on its back, uttering a loud bellow of rage and terror. Once on its feet again, it resumed its furious bounds, and at times made a rush for the men, but the latter were quick and nimble enough to dodge it. They allowed it to tire itself out, at the

same time taking advantage of its tricks to draw it gradually nearer the stable door, and at the end of half an hour they had succeeded in tethering it to the left post, where it continued to struggle and bellow.

The other ox, a large red one, was even more mettlesome. Trailing the long rope, it had gone back into the midst of the frightened herd. By means of patient feints, Vital succeeded in catching the end of the trailing lasso and there was an even harder struggle before the red ox could be tethered on the right of the grey one. Not until then did the old people and the girls venture out of the house.

The Bonhomme said:

"There are two fine beasts that will change the face of the country. God only knows what it will look like round here in ten years' time! I saw that in my young days when they were opening up land in Lower Canada."

Alma and Nipsya joined Vital and Mistatim and with them entered the stable by the door on the opposite side. Alma crept quietly toward the captives and, leaning over the lower half of the door, tried to pat them and make them take some salt. They were knowing enough to be less afraid of her and sniffed at her tempting hand, but were too much enraged to lick the salt. Vital and Mistatim drew in the ropes more and more until the animals' horns were

right against the wall. Then Vital, in his turn, showed himself and spent a long time quieting the oxen, first with his voice, and then with his hand.

At the end of half an hour, when he thought they were quiet enough, he brought the yoke near them and patiently familiarized them with the sight of this new object, and then with the feel of it.

Mistatim and Nipsya moved cautiously to the back of the stable, while the brother and sister attempted to yoke the oxen. They managed it at last, and Vital succeeded, also, in making them take the bit, made of plaited wire, though they resisted it with their tongues. Then, he carefully attached the double rein of rawhide.

He left the stable by the other door, to get the two-wheeled cart, the sides of which had been removed, leaving only the platform. Wheeling it behind the oxen, he forced the pole between them. A stout chain was attached to the centre of the axle-tree and twined around the pole to the metal end. Putting his whole weight on the back of the cart, Vital made the pole and chain rock up and down.

"Now, Alma! Put the metal end through the yoke ring as far as the bolt, and fasten the chain securely to the iron part just above! . . . That's fine!"

He gathered up the reins and stood behind his cart, ready to jump on.

"Now for the great moment! Alma, you and

Mistatim come and untie the ropes, but keep pulling on them so that the oxen may not know they're free. . . . . Fine! Now, let Nipsya take your rope, Alma! Mistatim and Nipsya can slacken the lassoes gradually while you release the animals' horns as quickly and as gently as you can. If you remove only one rope, you'll let the other go and the ox will trail it."

Alma did the job so quickly, and moreover, the two animals, after so many vain efforts, believed themselves so hopelessly captive, that when they were freed they had no suspicion of their freedom.

But suddenly, they caught sight of Vital standing on the cart and, turning sharply, made a dash for the herd, which scattered at once. Panic-stricken to find themselves captive even in their liberty and closely pursued by the man standing behind them and by those noisy wheels, they dashed along madly, with furious bounds. First, they rushed around the smudge in wide circles, until they seemed to surmise that the dense underbrush might rescue them from that terrible pursuit even as it had once delivered them from the flies. The strength of the man they were bearing along bruised the corners of their mouths and at times twisted their heads, but they did not swerve in their frantic dash for their goal. Like a mighty tornado that may come roaring overhead on a stormy day, overturning everything in its path, the two beasts dashed through the clumps of willows and young

poplars and disappeared in the billows of green. The *fracas* could be heard for a long time.

"My faith!" exclaimed Cléophas. "That was well worth seeing! It was nearly as thrilling as running the Athabasca rapids. There's a bit of adventure in a farmer's life, after all!"

"Yes," said Alma, "I thought for a moment that he was going up to heaven in his chariot, like the prophet Elijah. Did you see how the cart rose in the air and slid over the tree-tops?"

Nipsya was amazed that they took such a big thing so calmly. She, herself, was all a-tremble with admiration and fear. Wouldn't he be killed? But how brave and strong and cool-headed he had shown himself! Wasn't this just as brave a thing as breaking in Monsieur Alec's mare? Where was Vital now? Perhaps lying unconscious in the bush.

They were all back in the main room of the house. The Bonhomme was describing the first ploughing and, for once, seemed quite interested in farm-life.

"But," he concluded, "once you're properly settled, you have to keep on doing the same thing over and over, all your life, just like ants swarming forever round the same bit of ground. And each man is out for himself. The neighbour's bit of land doesn't interest you at all, unless you expect to make something out of it,—and then there are quarrels without end."

Nipsya was quite sure he was only talking like that in order to keep her mind off what was happening over there to the south, among the hills, and also to keep the others from divining his own anxiety. During supper, everything stuck in Nipsya's throat, and she could not help glancing furtively out of the window that showed the green slope where Vital had disappeared, at the same time straining her ears for the faintest sounds in the distance.

"Don't fret, child!" said her uncle. "Unless you see the oxen coming back with the cart in pieces, my lad's on top of it. He's a man, my lad! We went through some rough times together when I was trying to make a voyageur out of him. He's smart. Don't worry! That won't help any."

Just as Alma and Nipsya had finished milking the cows, they caught sight of Vital and his team returning very slowly along the Lac Sainte-Anne trail. At once, the girls put their pails of milk over the garden-fence and ran to meet him. As they drew nearer, they saw that the two noble animals were flecked with foam, and they could hear them breathing in deep, hoarse, laboured gasps like those of the dying; they moved along as if intoxicated and at times tried to lie down, but Vital lashed them with the long willow branch he carried.

"Get switches," he said to the girls, "and walk beside them. They have got to keep going to the end."

These other menacing presences put some spirit into the oxen, but as they approached the smudge, the grey ox rolled on its side, pulling the red ox on top of it. It took all the young man's strength to pull out the bows, which were choking them in that position, and relieve the grey ox of the weight of the red one.

Nipsya was expecting an outburst of bragging, but was disappointed.

"Have you saved me any supper?" he asked, smiling.

He tethered the oxen together by a strong leather cord around the base of their horns. Then he patted them and spoke to them kindly.

"There! I don't think they will recover their breath for half an hour. I'm going to eat first."

Nipsya had noticed at once that the palms of his hands were raw and that he was exhausted, although he had done his best not to show it. But he ate as she would never have dared to eat, and when his hunger had been satisfied, related simply:

"For three hours they struck at every stump they met. Then I managed to guide them on to the Lac Sainte-Anne trail. There, they found the going easy and took me as far as Onion Prairie, where Mahigan lives. I let them have a breathing-space, and then we started back, first at a good pace, then quite slowly.

They will make good workers. Are we going to start ploughing to-morrow, father?"

"Just as you like. Mistatim can stay here to-night and give us a hand. That will be better."

By this time, the two animals were still panting, but were slightly rested. They offered scarcely any resistance as they were taken down to the lake and afterwards into the stable to a stall full of fresh, sweet-smelling hay.

That night, before falling asleep, Nipsya thought of Vital again. He was accomplishing big things such as few men would tackle in the way he did, without having to be urged, without showing off, without bragging, without pride, even. An Indian might have done it, for in earlier days they used to ride buffalo, but he would have claimed a great deal of glory for it. If she could have done it, she would have boasted about it. But Vital never seemed to think himself superior to others, and she could not see why. She could not read him at all. She understood her uncle better; at least he had shown pride in his son's achievement; and she had noticed that Alma had refrained with difficulty from congratulating her brother and expressing pity for his poor, bleeding hands while she was bathing them and rubbing them with a mixture of bear's grease and tamarack-sap. Her grandmother and Mistatim had praised her cousin's

bravery, strength, and endurance for a long time, but he had seemed quite unaffected.

Nipsya was a little provoked at the tacit understanding and approval which his father and sister had accorded him, when she herself was puzzled by such self-effacement and almost condemned it. All her attempts to understand Vital only brought her back to those words of his, which she had said over and over to herself because she did not grasp their significance: "Do the best you know, the best you can. . . . I don't count. . . ." No; she had not seen the meaning of those words even yet. It was like drifting in her bark canoe on the lake: through the calm water close to the shore she could see the sand and weeds at the bottom, but farther out, the water was deep and green and ever-moving and her eye no longer could distinguish anything: there lay the deep, surging billows, there, the impenetrable.

Chapter XII

DAWN IN THE WEST

SHE awoke to hear her cousin Vital's quiet voice: "Another hot day! My oxen won't be so lively. I'll rub them down with some grease; then the flies won't bother them. Mistatim and the horses can haul the plough and the chain to the edge of the field, first. I think I shall put my winter mitts on; then the reins won't chafe my hands so much."

After breakfast, the three men, in their shirt-sleeves, went to the stable and were there a long time. Suddenly, Nipsya saw the oxen come out, yoked. Each had a rope around its horns, while Cléophas and Mistatim were holding on to the other ends of the ropes with all their might. Vital was pulling on the reins and guiding the oxen almost at his will, for, this time, their swollen gums and lips were more sensitive to the bit. Nevertheless, the three men were being dragged along pretty fast.

"You cursed children of the devil!" shouted the Bonhomme. "Ho! Ho! Whoa!"

Mistatim yelled at them in Cree all the invectives of Indian wrath.

Then Vital's deep voice said, calmly:

"Don't shout so much, Mistatim! That only makes them worse."

The struggle grew quieter. The two huge animals were bent on escaping into the underbrush, but, by leaning back and digging his heels into the ground, Vital managed to bring them back to the southwest trail every time.

The two girls, being inquisitive and feeling somewhat reassured, were following at a distance. Soon, they left the Lac Sainte-Anne trail and took one to the right which had been but recently opened up and which ended in a large clearing on a broad hill. Nipsya noticed that, here, everything had been cut down level with the ground, and piles of branches were lying in long, straight rows, their foliage as yet only half-dry. Beneath this foliage she could see huge blackened trunks, remnants of the ancient forest which had been destroyed by fire. She was surprised at the amount of work that it must have required.

Meanwhile, the oxen, though still sullen, were beginning to realize the futility of their struggle and would stop without too much stubborness when they heard their master's "Ho!" spoken in a tone of quiet authority. That gave the men a chance to recover their breath.

"*Bâtèche!*" exclaimed Cléophas. "This is worse than making a portage with a 100-pound pack! But it's more exciting. Ah! If a farmer's life were all like

this, and if I were only twenty years younger, I might be trying it myself, after all. At any rate, when you are doing this kind of work, you don't merely exist: you live!"

The girls had ventured closer and were following the proceedings with interest. When he had brought the animals in front of the plough, Vital handed the reins to Mistatim for a moment while he hitched them up. Then, going behind the plough again, he tightened the reins about his waist and grasped the heavy handles.

"Now, father, you and Mistatim must try to guide them in as straight a line as possible with those peeled sticks I have planted to the end of the field."

He clicked his tongue sharply and commandingly.

The two powerful beasts, surprised at the unexpected resistance of the ploughshare as it tore up the fibres and roots with which that soil was matted, made a mighty effort. They were determined to overcome that tenacity and dashed half-way across the field in broken bounds. But neither the ploughshare, nor Cléophas, nor Mistatim slackened hold. After a while, the oxen ceased their jerks, but kept up their fast pace to the end of the furrow. There, when they felt the plough coming out of the ground, they made another attempt to escape into the bush in front of them. It required all the resistance of Vital and Mistatim and all the threats of Cléophas on their left

to make them turn to the right and stand beside, and in a line with, the first furrow. Then they were allowed to recover their breath. The Bonhomme, panting, mopped his brow and regarded the work.

"*Ma foi!* I do not think that would take first prize in a ploughing match. But they have nerve and they don't give up. They are not lazy, like some of their breed."

"Just wait a bit, father! I didn't go very deep for the first furrow. We'll see what they will do when I go down six or eight inches. Besides, I chose that row because there weren't many roots there. It wasn't very hard."

On the next furrow, the animals went more slowly, and the long ribbon of black soil was not broken so often, nor was it thrown aside so violently or to such a distance. It turned over better, too, falling on top of the first furrow in a straighter line. But when they reached the end, near the trail that led to the stable, there was a fresh struggle before they could be brought back along the first furrow. This further deception exhausted their anger, and only fear of their master remained. The red ox, finding a well-marked trail in front of him this time, followed it instinctively. There was no longer any necessity for Cléophas or Mistatim to pull on their ropes. Vital straightened his furrow carefully, cutting a wider section here, a narrower one there. At the fourth turn,

he raised the front wheel to allow the ploughshare to sink deeper. The powerful beasts merely curved their tails a little more. The ploughshare and the brush-knife, which had been well-sharpened, cut clean through the roots or snapped them with a sound like the crack of a whip. At one moment, Vital felt a stronger resistance and saw the animals' tails curve even more.

"Ho!"

The oxen halted, but kept the chain stretched taut.

"It's that tamarack root again. We are right in the middle of it."

"Bah!" said the Bonhomme. "Let them go! Let us see what they can do! If anything breaks, we can mend it."

Vital clicked his tongue softly.

"Gently, now! Gently, gently!"

The brave beasts seemed to understand. Without jerks, and with an increasing effort that made the muscles of their legs stand out more and more prominently, they shook the gnarled root which was too hard to split or cut. It slid over the ploughshare and caught on the knife, while, on the left side of the plough, the surface of the field, from beneath the very hoofs of the oxen to a distance of ten feet, was lifted in a semi-circle. Vital exerted all his weight on the handles.

"Gently! Gently!!"

The oxen pulled yet more powerfully. There were sudden crashes. Then, the huge root, with all the fibres clinging to the ancient stump which had refused to rot, rose slowly from the soil while the plough was wrenched out of the furrow.

"Ho!"

"*Cré bonsoir!*" exclaimed the Bonhomme. "Those two creatures are worth three men and six horses. You would have had a great half-hour playing on that with an axe! But that job didn't take those oxen half a minute. Ah! Vital, you will be hacking up the whole district with those two beasts!"

Vital smiled as he lifted the enormous root and shoved it out of the way.

"You see, father, they're getting to be like good Christians—doing their duty the best they can."

Nipsya felt that he had intended those words for her, and her heart contracted. He was paying his animals a compliment to which she believed she had an even greater right, since she, too, would have done everything to please him, and without causing him so much trouble. As if he had said that merely to test her and was reading her heart, the young man said to his cousin:

"Would you mind setting fire to all those piles of branches and clearing the ground properly? Alma will help you."

"But we shall roast in this heat!" was Alma's retort.

Nipsya was only too happy to show her willingness in such a little matter. She would have liked some difficult task that would have proved her great devotion to Vital. Perhaps he would have thought more of her, then.

Using flint and birch-tinder, Cléophas set fire to the first pile, then told Nipsya how to carry the flame from pile to pile by snatching brands in time, before everything was ablaze. The girls spent the rest of the morning at this task; thick clouds of black smoke rolled skyward and slowly vanished there. As each pile burned, they went back to it and with a long, forked stick of green wood, thrust back into the glowing embers the fragments that had fallen out and had not been consumed.

All the winged things that could be heard and seen in that virgin country, all the furtive woodland things, came flocking round to gaze upon this amazing spectacle.

After the midday meal, Vital left his oxen in the cool stable so as not to dishearten them and also to avoid bruising their withers too much, for sweat had made them tender. He decided to wait until the intense heat had passed.

As soon as the table had been cleared, he opened

a book on it, and no longer seemed to see or hear anything. This was something new to Nipsya. She had seen Monsieur Alec looking at a book in that way, sometimes, but he had laid it down on the counter as soon as she gave her order, whereas her cousin seemed as fascinated by those little black signs as if he really saw in them something intensely interesting. She was not ignorant of the fact that books told interesting stories to those who understood them, but she had never imagined that they could be as absorbing as anything seen or heard around one. And it always hurt her feelings when her cousin attached more importance to some other object than to herself.

She walked round him for a long time, without managing to make him look up. Finally, she made up her mind:

"What do those signs say?"

"Nipsya, it is rude to interrupt anyone who is reading. But as you have been a good girl and are doing your best, I will explain to you. The best books are the voices of the wisest or the best men, and they teach you lots of things that you would never find out otherwise. Listen to what this one tells me here!"—And he read her a few passages from *The Imitation of Christ.*

"I think that book knows a lot of things," Nipsya remarked, when he had finished reading, "but I didn't understand everything. What is 'grace'?"

"If you ask the Great Spirit, He will tell you far better than I could," Vital replied.

And he went on reading, which annoyed Nipsya.

She went and sat under the trees, at the edge of the bank, and thought deeply. She could not see what the Great Spirit had to do with her and her cousin. In the first place, this was their own business; secondly, the Great Spirit must have many other things to think about in connection with the vast work of Nature. To find out what she wanted to know, she would have had more faith in the symbols of her dreams. Her grandmother often had revelations from her guardian spirit, who was the crow. She consulted him frequently and knew how to interpret his every action and tone. Only, as Nipsya had noticed, without saying anything, if those revelations were often enough verified, quite as often it was just the other way. To be sure, in the latter case, her grandmother always managed to explain it by putting the blame on herself; but in spite of it all, Nipsya, who had heard the voyageurs ridicule such practices, remained incredulous. In Vital's case it was different. She had never seen him holding elaborate consultations with his Guardian Spirit, as was the Cree custom before every important undertaking, nor had she seen him offering up the ritual sacrifices; and yet, he had done two big things without any hesitation at all: he had done them as if his Guardian Spirit had been with him

all the time and could be very plainly interpreted. To be sure, he spoke to the Great Spirit in person, and, of course, if one could really communicate with Him, there was hardly any doubt about His being much more powerful than lesser spirits and His being able to make Himself better understood. Yes, it was worth trying. It wasn't impossible, or Vital wouldn't have advised her to do it. But in order to obtain what she wanted, ought she to go through the same rites as were used in connection with the other spirits? Why wouldn't Vital explain all these things to her? Her grandmother could be of no help in this matter: she didn't know the Great Spirit well enough! Perhaps Alma could teach her a little, even though she didn't know so much as her brother.

So, that same afternoon, when they were back in the field with the men and were helping to gather into heaps the roots that had been thrown up or cut by the plough, Nipsya questioned her cousin Alma. But Alma had not her brother's clear, precise mind, and it was a maze of ideas through which she wandered. Nipsya was unable to follow her and was especially at a loss to understand why she should pay so much attention to what the Black-Robes told her. "I don't care a rap what *they* think!" said Nipsya to herself. It was useless for Alma to insist that their views were exactly the same as Vital's. She remained firmly convinced in her own mind that Vital had his

own way of communicating with the Great Spirit. That was the only thing that mattered.

But Alma's lengthy explanations, though somewhat incoherent, had made her more familiar with the French language and had revealed the meaning of numerous expressions that had hitherto puzzled her. Moreover, she had a better grasp of the main ideas in this new religion of the white people. She did not care about the rest.

For a whole week, with the exception of one rainy day, Vital's plough and his father's axe went on breaking up that ground which was so full of fibres and roots, the girls gathering the rubbish into heaps as it accumulated.

On the last evening, when their labour was ended, it marked the beginning of agriculture in all that vast region of lakes and forests. A large square field of straight, regular furrows, dotted here and there with heaps of roots and encircled with verdure, lay dark and bare on the hill-top, close to the lake whose restless waters remained unmovable, defying the efforts of men.

Said Vital:

"In the spring, the ground will be soft; the winter will have pulverized it. It is good soil and will bear fine crops for centuries. I'll try some oats and a little

wheat as well as barley, and then we shall be less at the mercy of the Hudson's Bay traders."

"Yes," said the Bonhomme, "but the land will get a stronger hold on you. Then, what if the British come and take it away from you? . . ."

"There'll be a battle before they drive me out!" his son replied.

Chapter XIII

A LOVE POTION

THE next day, Vital gave his oxen their liberty again. But they had become so thoroughly domesticated that they stood bellowing outside the closed door of the stable for a long time.

While the grandmother remained at home, the others took two horses and the cart to a large hay-meadow, a mile and a half to the south-west. This was a flat, marshy valley which the great fire had stripped completely, burning the trees to the very roots and consuming the thick moss on the surface. The middle of it was drained by the meanderings of the creek that flowed from the Plus Grand Lac des Aigles to the Lac des Aigles. The first lake is four miles south-west of the second and this marshy valley lies between them. The vast forest that used to extend north of the valley and the two lakes was called the Forêt des Aigles; it had escaped the great fire and was yet awaiting the coming of the white men who were to ravage it.

The greater part of the meadow is drained by natural water-courses flowing to the creek. Originally, they were carved by rains in the deep ashes, before grass had formed a new humus. In some places

marshy basins have been formed, where nothing grows save round-stemmed reeds, or *spargaines* and bulrushes. The remainder of this hay-meadow produces finer grasses, some of which grow as tall as a man and some even taller, if they are not cut too frequently. There is blue grass, red-top, carex, and, in the drier parts, vetches, pea-vines, ray-grass, and numerous other varieties. Wild mint is plentiful there, too, and its fragrance perfumes the cured hay.

The broad green valley was spangled with perennial flowers—white, yellow, pink, blue, and mauve.

They spent the first day building a shack at the edge of the bush, upon a slope overlooking the entire meadow from the north-west. Spruces and poplars of all sizes were plentiful; and the horses, with the aid of a log-chain, conveyed logs in pairs, and poles for the roof twelve or fourteen at a time.

Toward evening, as rain was threatening and they had not yet been able to roof the shack with a layer of straw, they pitched the tent. Alma and Nipsya, after preparing the men's supper, went back to the lake to milk the cows and get more provisions for the next day. (This they would do every day throughout the haying.)

They were obliged to return the next morning, in spite of the rain, or the men would have had but a very scanty meal. Nipsya was soaked through, but nevertheless spent a very happy afternoon, for here

there were no books to which Vital could escape: she could ask him questions to her heart's content. Her uncle and Alma, amused at her enthusiasm, joined in the conversation, too, and so she acquired plenty of new ideas and gained a better understanding of a number of others.

She realized gradually that the Cree language had no words to express all these things, and that Vital and his sister had good reasons for not speaking it all the time.

Occasionally, her cousin Vital resented the pointedness of her questions.

"What right have you to want to know even my most intimate thoughts?" he enquired. "It seems to me, you are a little too inquisitive."

She hung her head, while her heart contracted painfully: Couldn't he understand her desire to please him? Couldn't he understand that she only wanted to know him well so that she might grow exactly like him? Oh, no; she was not inquisitive in the way he meant! He had misjudged her this time, and it hurt her most bitterly to have her efforts so wrongly interpreted. But what could she say in order that he might hear the song in her heart? What could she do to awaken in him a voice that would respond to the cry of her whole being? If only her grandmother had been more sympathetic, she might have asked her to brew a potion such as the Indians used. She had once

heard it said that that Irishman who was her father must have given one to her mother to make her love him so madly. But was there any truth in such things? White men always smiled at the mere mention of them.

"What is an *akoukasamatoine*?" she asked, blushing a little.

Vital smiled amusedly, but there was a tender light in his eyes that made her lower her own, while a thrill of happiness quickened the beating of her heart.

"There are various kinds, Nipsya. Every Indian tribe and every potion-monger have their own particular recipes. Has somebody given you one?"

"No."

She had no need of one, herself. He ought to have known that, at least.

"Were you wanting to give one to somebody else?"

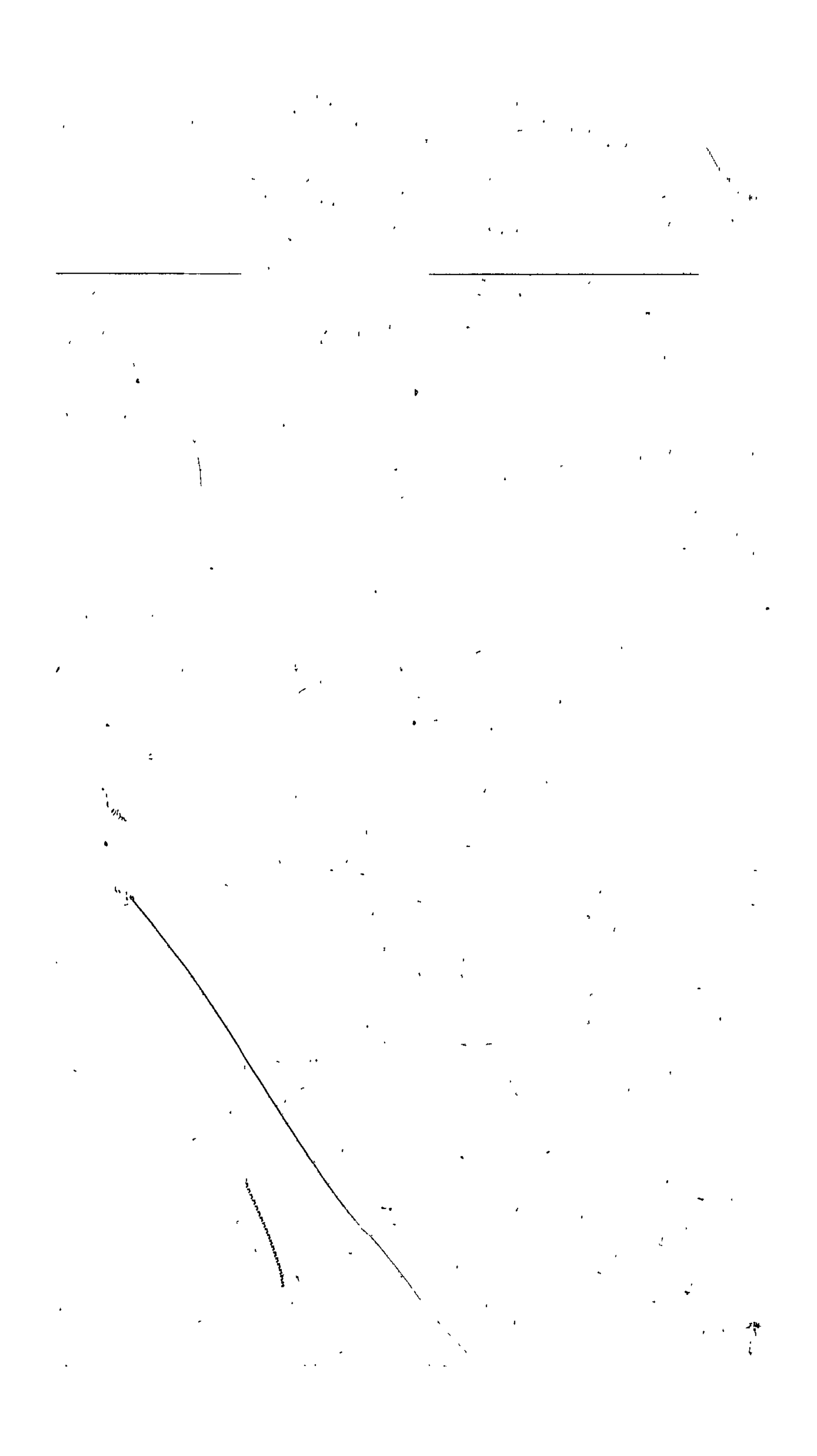
"I don't know. I would like to know what it is."

"The best potion, Nipsya, is true love. And true love is not seeking to satisfy one's own desires, but seeking above all else the happiness of the loved one. That is renunciation again. Do you understand?"

He had spoken seriously, almost sadly. But his words were very deep. She was not sure that she grasped his meaning. Yes, she did want his happiness very much, but she desired her own happiness, too. Why should the one interfere with the other? Couldn't they both be happy together, the one

through the other? Then why did he talk of renunciation? Did he mean that she must renounce the old Cree religion and accept his? She dared not ask him. She was not sure that, even after such an easy sacrifice as that, he would be willing to love her as she desired to be loved. And she could not ask him, not only because it was not proper for any girl to offer herself like that, but because she was too proud to run the risk of a refusal. And yet, did not her instinct tell her that underneath all her cousin's mockery and indifference there was something deep and tender that touched her every now and then and made her very happy?

She sought enlightenment on other subjects not quite so delicate, and gained a clearer understanding of many things that she had been anxious to have explained. She could see quite plainly now why Vital would not want to marry a girl of no religion or of an inferior one. He would always put the things of the spirit before those that had to do with the physical body. She was dimly aware, also, that he could never be really happy with any woman who could not see into the depths of his being and share his spiritual as well as his physical life.



Chapter XIV

NIPSYA AND THE BLACK-ROBE

DAYS of sunshine followed: at times it was very warm, but more often there were cooling breezes such as blow almost continually over those highlands.

Vital had made his first cut into the hay-meadow, —his scythe with its long S-shaped handle had come from an American factory,—and by the middle of the third morning, when the first windrows were found to be dry enough, the girls were able to begin the task of cocking the hay. (At that high altitude the atmosphere is always so extraordinarily rarefied that there is no necessity for skill in hay-making.)

At the end of the week, dew being the only moisture that had dampened the hay, Vital made a long sled with two young tamaracks, whose curved butts served for rounded fore-parts, and which were bridged and held parallel by means of two raised cross-pieces. Then he constructed the hay-rack of birch-poles and willow-pickets, joined together with the aid of an auger and reinforced at the corners with rawhide strips. The rack was placed on the sled.

That evening, Vital went home with his sister and Nipsya, returning to the meadow the next morning.

with the two oxen. The renewed captivity after their long rest in the open made the animals somewhat restive, and when they had been hitched up to the sled and the Bonhomme pitched the first forkful of hay into the rack, they tried to bolt; but their driver had been expecting that, and promptly quieted them with his voice and by means of the bit. As soon as they had become accustomed to this unexpected treatment, they were guided sometimes by Alma, sometimes by Nipsya, while the two men pitched the haycocks into the rack, one of the girls pressing them down as they were pitched in. Each haystack received ten or twelve loads of hay, until that part of the meadow had been cleared, when it was more convenient to start another stack nearer the remaining haycocks.

On a Saturday evening in the middle of August, they were surprised in these activities by the appearance of a Black-Robe, who emerged suddenly from the edge of the bush, near the newly-erected shack, and came toward them over the mown section of the meadow.

"Look!" cried Cléophas. "Here is Father Lozée! Young ladies, you aren't fit to be seen, with your heads full of hay! Get down off the haystack and tidy yourselves up a bit!"

"Oh, go along, father!" Alma replied. "We are all right as we are. It will show him that we are workers!"

But Nipsya had more vanity and felt rather humiliated.

"Ho, monsieur le curé!" shouted Cléophas. "Don't come too close! These two beasts are pretty wild yet."

"Two fine cattle, Bonhomme! They ought to be good pullers."

"That they are! They would root up the Rocky Mountains. But what are you doing in these parts? Did you lose your way?"

"Oh, no, Bonhomme! Only I found nobody at home but your mother-in-law. She was quite polite but hadn't much to say. When I had put my bag on the bed, I asked her where you were, and here I am! Do you need a hand?"

"We are all through," replied the Bonhomme, "or, at least, now that you are here, we'll say we have done enough for to-day. We're going to take you back in an ox-cart. As it only holds four, one of the young people will have to walk behind."

"No, father! Alma Lajeunesse will walk in front and get there ahead of you!"

"Just as you like, my girl! Then you can help your grandmother set the table for supper."

So Alma started off at once at a smart pace, while the others went back to the shack at the edge of the bush, where they had left the cart.

On the way back, the missionary, who was sitting

in the rear with the Bonhomme, asked Nipsya a few questions. She answered in monosyllables, without turning her head. Instinctively, she defied this Black-Robe before whom her uncle and cousins bowed down. She felt almost hostile toward him because she surmised that if it came to a conflict, his hold over the man she loved would be stronger than hers. But she was wise enough not to reveal her thoughts. She was intuitive enough to perceive, and frank enough to admit, that the real conflict was within herself: between her heart, which desired complete possession of Vital, and her reason, which said that Vital was not the man to yield to any but a good influence, and that then it was only right that he should yield.

At supper, Father Lozée occupied the place of honour, at the end of the table. He had Cléophas on his right and the grandmother on his left. He treated the latter with respect and diplomacy, addressing her only in Cree, but she repulsed all his advances with her polite indifference.

Vital ate his supper hurriedly, then went out and mounted his horse. He was going to inform as many as possible of their Catholic neighbours that Father Lozée was there. He did not return until nightfall, after rapidly covering fifteen miles.

In the meantime, the two old *coureurs* of the North-West were sitting by the north window, smoking their pipes, the old woman showing her hostility only by

not smoking with them. The girls had gone out to milk the cows, and see to the calves, the hens, and the young pigs.

Deep peace reigned in the big white house, the door of which stood open to let in the smoke from a smudge-pail on the threshold.

The Bonhomme could appreciate the quiet after the sultry days of hard work, but if he was inactive too long, it made him fidgety.

"Who would have thought, monsieur le curé, that Bonhomme Lajeunesse would end his days here like a prairie-dog in its hole?" he said.

"Ah! my old voyageur, you are like myself. You need the great spaces and the surprises of the morrow. We can not become used to a monotonous life such as the city people like. We are brothers of the old patriarchs who spent their days in pastures ever new; we are like children, who can't be content to sit and look at each other but are forever starting out to discover the wonders of the world."

"Indeed, monsieur le curé, if I had to live like those city people in the old country, people who know nothing of the earth beyond a morsel as big as a pocket handkerchief, and who do the same thing three hundred and sixty-five days of the year,—I would go mad, for sure!"

"And that is just what happens to a good many," said the priest. "The majority of those people have

no horizon beyond themselves and their work. When they grow sick of their voluntary imprisonment and the evils brought about by their servitude and overcrowding they think to improve their condition by adorning their prison with more comforts and luxuries. They only succeed in creating further needs which, in their turn, create more servitude and make more prisoners. Then, when they become aware of their misery, without seeing the cause of it, they analyse themselves minutely and anxiously. Many of them become writers in order to share their discoveries with their companions in distress; and of all the books they write, the most avidly read are those that reveal the symptoms of the social evil, or those that point out the remedy—but nobody sees it—that lies in the fine, healthy life of the open spaces, where man finds something other than himself and returns to the simplicity of childhood. It takes little to awaken a child's wonder because he hasn't yet grown boastful of his own achievements and so finds even in that little, more than he himself knows how to do. An insect, a flower, is to the child almost a miracle; it is a thing of joy. But the city man is enraptured with his inanimate art and the narrow, feeble laws by which he governs his prison, merely because that art and those laws were created by himself. Ah! Let us remain voyageurs, Bonhomme! Let us remain children, capable of under-

standing the great life of a world not made by man!"

"Yes, indeed, monsieur le curé!"

When Cléophas said "monsieur le curé," he put into it an inoffensive irony. He knew quite well that he ought to have said, "Father," because the missionary was a member of the order known as The Oblate Fathers of Mary, but his advanced years and independent character would not allow Cléophas willingly to give that title of respect to a man younger than himself, no matter how slight the difference in their ages.

When Vital and the girls returned, Father Lozée said:

"If you like, I will receive your confession to-night; then it won't take me so long to deal with the others to-morrow morning."

Nipsya went and sat beside her grandmother, and great was her curiosity when she saw her uncle and cousins, in turn, go to the Black-Robe in the other room, whence she could hear whispering. They came out again looking very solemn. Nipsya now understood that at confession people told their sins to the priest who, as a representative of the Great Spirit, forgave them if they promised not to commit those sins again. But she had forgotten to have this matter thoroughly explained to her. She was quite sure that neither her uncle nor her cousins had committed any sins since Sainte-Anne's Day, because she had been

with them all the time. Then why were they confessing? This was certainly a very peculiar religion at times!

When they had finished, Father Lozée came straight to Nipsya and sat down beside her.

"Would you like to be baptized, my daughter?"

"I don't know."

"Well, then, suppose we try to find out!"

Nipsya glanced at her grandmother's inscrutable face, and then said:

"I am not sure whether grandmother would like it."

"Of course she would like it," said the priest, "if you wanted it. Your grandmother is a good woman. Ask her!"

Nipsya, deeply stirred, looked at her grandmother again.

"I have told you already, child," said the old woman. "I can not go against your own heart."

"I do not want to leave you, grandmother."

"But, my child," said Father Lozée, "there is no question of your leaving your grandmother. You can see that your cousins are very fond of her, even if they are Christians."

"Yes," added Alma. "Grandmother knows we love her, don't you, grandmother? And you won't keep Nipsya from adopting our religion if she wants to, will you?"

"No, child. I could not stop her. The times are stronger than we are," replied the old Indian woman.

"And now, my child," the missionary continued, "ask your uncle and your cousin Vital what they think about it. We shall decide by the majority, if you are not sure what to do."

"My faith!" exclaimed Cléophas. "If mother does not mind, I am in favour."

But Vital said nothing, until Nipsya raised her eyes and gave him a look of mingled reproach and expectation.

"Nipsya, do the best you know, the best you can!"

Oh, yes! That was always his rule. Now, all at once, she knew what was best for her, and she must certainly do it. Even if her grandmother did mind a little, that would pass, while with Vital her decision would bring about a reconciliation that would last always.

"Yes, I would like it," she murmured.

"Very well, my child. I shall baptize you to-morrow, after the Mass. And now I will explain to you thoroughly what baptism is."

Carefully and patiently, the missionary catechized her, and soon she forgot to feel any qualms about her decision. She was dominated by one thought: she would be of the same religion, she would have the same Guardian Spirit as Vital. She strove to understand clearly the Black-Robe's simple explanations

and found them more logical than Alma's and less difficult to grasp than Vital's; with the latter, she had always run up against reticences which she had found it impossible to understand or overcome. Furthermore, many of these beliefs were held by her grandmother and the other Crees. It was really quite simple: to give up all the false manitous and believe only in the Great Spirit and the Church to which Vital belonged. And she must love the Great Spirit with all her heart and must not disobey Him. Well, that would be easy because He was Vital's God. And then she would have an entirely new and pure soul, which could not fail to make her more lovable.

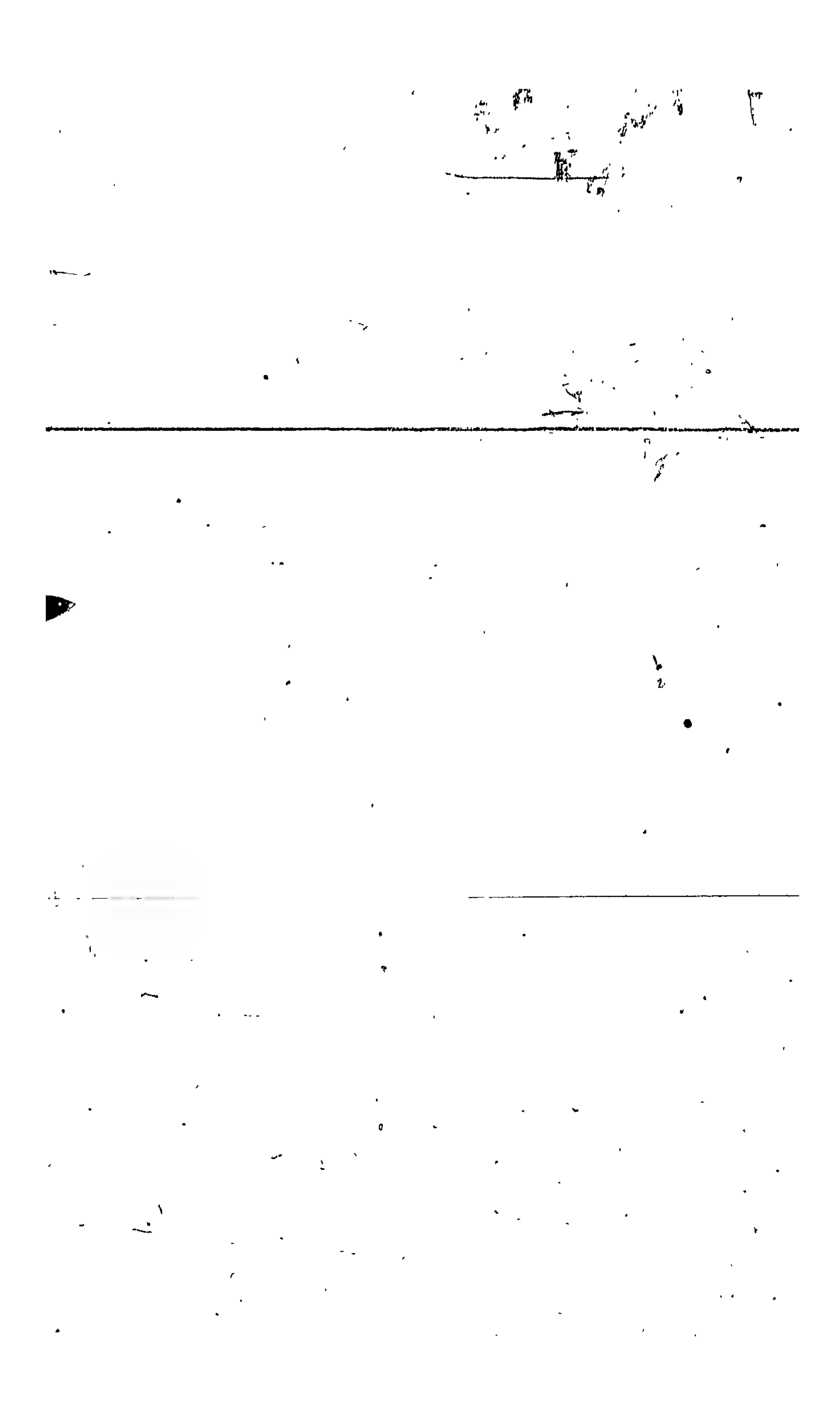
"All right, my child," said the priest. "Next month, you shall take your first communion. And now, whom do you choose for your godfather and godmother?"

"My faith, monsieur le curé!" said the Bonhomme. "It is an easy matter to choose the godmother. As to the godfather, let her do Vital the honour! She will have this advantage: he will be left to her longer. And mother will put up with the business better than if she chose me."

"Very well. That is settled," the missionary concluded.

Then he knelt for a prayer, which he said in Cree. Nipsya had joined them, as, lately, she had been in the habit of doing. She was somewhat surprised to

hear the Black-Robe say the very same things as Alma said. But in her native tongue, they were clearer, and as she had remembered the Father's brief and simple explanations, she found that she could understand nearly everything this time, and that it was a good and beautiful prayer.



Chapter XV

DESTINY OF A COUNTRY

ON the Sunday, Alma got up at dawn and made elaborate preparations for dinner after telling her grandmother that neither she, nor Vital, nor their father would need plates for breakfast as they were not going to have any. Nipsya was not sure whether or not she ought to follow their example, so she timidly consulted Vital. He smiled, but with a far-away expression in his eyes, as he answered:

"Do the best you know, the best you can!"

"Well, then, I am not hungry."

"Nipsya," he said, gravely, "you must always be frank and truthful. Do not say you are not hungry. If you decide not to have any breakfast, say: 'I do not care for any breakfast.' "

How hard it was to do the best you knew, the best you could! She had had no thought of telling a lie, and yet she had done that very thing, unintentionally. For a brief second, she felt discouraged and had a sudden rebellious impulse to go back and join her grandmother at the table, but preferred to prove to Vital that she could make this sacrifice for him. She hoped that being baptized would help her to think and behave better.

At eight o'clock, Alma and her brother erected the altar in the little room, ready for the Mass. On two large blocks, placed upright and six feet apart, they laid two wide planks and covered these with a white cloth. In the centre, they arranged a wooden box, covered with a fine serviette, and on either side of this simple tabernacle a bottle with a candle in the neck of each. Nipsya, though keenly interested, dared not question them, because they were making these preparations in the rapt manner of Crees when they were about to consult their spirit and must not be disturbed.

A little later, the Father began receiving the confession of those visitors who desired it. The others, nearly all men, who had come on horseback, remained in the large room, where the Bonhomme made them welcome with a simple, cordial dignity. Nipsya already knew nearly all of them, for hardly a day went by without this man or that coming, usually in the evening, to chat with some member of the Lajeunesse family, or to borrow some tool, or to pay court to the girls. Some would come to the hay-meadow, others to the home. On the Sunday evening following the ploughing, quite a gathering had come to play cards and listen to the Bonhomme relating adventures of his younger days.

When the Mass began, there were a score of people there, nearly all of whom took communion. After the

Mass, Nipsya was baptized first, and then two babies.

The Bonhomme had invited everybody to dinner. Few excused themselves, and the big table was barely large enough. French, Cree, English, and even German voices could be heard. Alma and Nipsya, who had hurriedly swallowed a slice of meat pie, waited on all the rest. The missionary, at the end of the table, and the Bonhomme on his right, received from the guests equal tokens of respect and esteem. The grandmother sat on the Black-Robe's left, erect and haughty, though somewhat embarrassed in the presence of so many strangers and by customs with which she was unable to fall in. The Father did not slight her.

"Times have changed, Madame, since our young days, when gatherings were held out in the open, or in tepees roofed with branches or skins."

"*Hunhun!*"

"It is sad to see the Territories invaded by every nationality of the Old World while the great Cree nation is crowded back into the mountains and the north; very sad, too, to see your beautiful language dying with the old people."

"*Hunhun!* It is not dead yet," said the old woman.

"God grant that it may be preserved! But the Cree blood will survive even if mixed with white blood. Each man, each nation, has a part to play in the world, and neither your part nor that of the Cree

people is finished. Bonhomme, how many children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren have you to-day?"

"My faith, monsieur le curé!" replied the old man. "I can't tell you exactly. They arrive almost daily. When I last heard from Red River and Batoche, it made sixty-one."

"Fine! They will pass the hundred mark before you die." Then, turning to the old Indian woman: "You see, Madame, your descendants are becoming a strong race. They are not near disappearance."

"Say, Father Lozée!" said a deep voice. "Is it true that the surveyors of the Government of Lower Canada are marking out the land everywhere in squares? There is no sense to that! Where will the roads be then? Will people have to walk through the muskegs in the summer? And how will they build villages if each man lives half a mile away from his neighbour? It may look all right on paper, but it is ridiculous!"

"Vital!" called another voice. "What is Riel doing these days?"

"No definite news," Vital answered, "but he is getting ready. You can count on him, L'Hirondelle. If the Government doesn't grant us our titles to the land, there will be war!"

When the dinner was over, Alma and Nipsya sat down at the table. All the rest had seated themselves

round the missionary and the Bonhomme, some on the bed, some on the floor, and others on short blocks which they had brought in from the wood-pile. Pipes were lighted and conversation became brisk.

"Father Lozée," demanded Pierre Langlois, "tell us some of the news that is in the papers and letters from France!"

Then the missionary related what had been happening in the different countries of the world. But it was mainly of France that the majority wanted to hear. Was there no hope that some new Napoleon would come, or some more fortunate Montcalm, to put an end to the rapacities of Britain?

"And yet, monsieur le curé," said the Bonhomme, "you tell us that *le bon Dieu* governs the world! Can you explain why the British come and ravage the North-West?"

"Bonhomme, I am not a member of the Council of Heaven," the priest replied, "and I can not tell you for certain what is to be Canada's destiny in the world-plan. But without pretending to be a prophet, one can reason. And this is what looks possible to me:

"In the time of our Lord, the Roman Empire had united the greater part of the Old World under one government, by adopting one language for the people, which was Latin, and a more refined language for literature, which was Greek; also, by making short and easy routes from one country to another. And

that is exactly what the British Empire is doing to-day. It was the expansion and unity of the Roman Empire that helped a great deal to spread and unify Christianity. Perhaps the British Empire, in its turn, is preparing the way of the Lord, and it's not unlikely that Canada may play the leading part. Civilisation appears to move from east to west, like the sun. It has invaded Eastern America, and now it is rolling toward us. And already, the yellow races across the Pacific are waking up. Canada is about to become the world's vast artery, the world's very heart. Its position on the globe makes that very probable. . . . I should not be surprised if, when the day of the Lord dawns, our Canada, with the English race and language for the realm of material things, and the French race and language for the realm of thought, were the field of battle and victory out of which will come Christian unity again to dominate the world."

For the rest of the afternoon and until late in the evening, they exchanged ideas on the instructive past, the indiscernible present, and the future which for these people was filled with high hopes and fear of the unknown. Nipsya was listening to all these voices, and although she did not understand everything, her mind was growing deeper and broader.

Chapter XVI

MAHIGAN

THE next day, the missionary accompanied the Lajeunesse party to the hay-meadow. He was going to continue his parochial visits in a westerly direction and would call first at the home of Mistatim, who lived south of the Plus Grand Lac des Aigles.

"Would you mind asking him, Father, if he will come and help my father stack hay?" Vital said. "I didn't think to ask him the other day. It would be a great help to us, and he knows I always pay well."

"Yes, I shall do that, Vital," the Black-Robe answered; then he started back up the creek, in the direction of the Plus Grand Lac des Aigles.

"The wind has been blowing from the east for three days now," Cléophas remarked. "Hurry, girls! Cock the hay as fast as you can. There is pretty bad weather brewing. At dusk, the fireflies will be dancing in grand style and the mosquitoes will be biting hard."

That evening, Alma and Nipsya reached home just in time to milk the cows before the rain began. The next day, they had a fine steady drizzle all the way to the meadow. Nipsya, though wet through, was glad of the rain because she was looking forward to a day

of happy comradeship with Vital. But she found only her uncle in the shack, and he, to amuse her, sang several voyageurs' songs that she did not know. Mistatim had returned home, and Vital had not thought the rain heavy enough to interrupt his mowing. At noon, he came in soaking wet, but in a good humour and with a good appetite. After the meal, he said to Nipsya:

"Now, cousin, sing me one of the songs that father taught you this morning. When Alma joined in, you were making as much noise as a dozen coyotes."

"I will, if uncle will sing with me," said Nipsya. "I don't know them very well, yet."

Then her voice blended with the Bonhomme's, the latter being in tune though, at times, a little out of breath. Nipsya threw all her heart into it in order to overcome her shyness. Vital was seated on a block near the camp stove, his hands clasped behind his head and his back against the wall, and Nipsya was pleased to see that he was apparently enjoying her singing. She would have sung all afternoon, for she knew the Cree songs as well, and when her repertoire had been exhausted, could have begun all over again, but at the end of an hour Vital got up and said:

"That's very nice, but there's no work being done."

He picked up his hat and went out into the rain; when he came back, Nipsya and Alma had left for the lake.

Mistatim did not return until two days later, when he thought that the hay ought to be dry enough. And then, for long days, the monotonous work went on, enlivened at times by the appearance of a moose, or a coyote, or a young bear, who had come to the edge of the bush to investigate these new activities of man.

* * *

One afternoon, in early September, the girls had no more haycocks to make, so they went back to the little shack. While Alma was preparing the men's supper, Nipsya took a small tin pail and went into the vast northern forest. The moose-berries were beginning to redden. There had already been one fairly heavy frost, and she thought that if the frost had been sufficiently penetrating, the *atocas* that grew in the moss of the small muskeg, a quarter of a mile away, would have lost their sourness. She had gone barely half the distance when she heard a light rustling behind her. She turned round, but saw nothing, and concluded that it must have been a rabbit. The tapping of a woodpecker on a dry trunk prevented her from hearing clearly.

But when her nostrils caught the scent of *kinikinik*, which is smoked by the Crees, she retraced her steps slowly, looking carefully about her and gathering a few moose-berries here and there. Suddenly, through the already bronzed leaves of a thick pembina bush,

she caught sight of a copper-coloured face in which two small dark eyes sparkled and laughed, and she recognised Mahigan.

"The berries are ripe already," he said. "You are going to gather *atocas*. Let us go together! I know lots of other good places where there are red cherries and choke-cherries as big as my little finger-nail."

She surveyed him from head to foot with her serious eyes, which always held something that seldom found expression in words.

"Are your legs healed already?" she asked.

"Oh, I know all about cures! I have just taken some remedies to my brother Mistatim's wife, this afternoon. She is often sick. She took it into her head that I was going to give her something harmful or cast a spell over her, and ran away in this direction. I have been following her at a distance to see that no harm came to her. They are all going to be turned against me. Are you afraid of me, too?"

And his small, glittering eyes were laughing yet.

"Afraid of what?" said Nipsya. "I am strong; and besides, I would only have to call out and the men would come."

"You are brave!"

His eyes betrayed the ardour he was striving to conceal. Nipsya was not unconscious of that scarcely-veiled admiration and, in spite of her outward calm, the blood quickened in her veins.

"I have no desire to go with you, Mahigan. You have a bad reputation."

"Just as you like. I don't want to force you," he replied.

Nipsya came back slowly, gathering moose-berries and a few pembinas on her way. She knew quite well that his ardent eyes were following her every movement, but she had shown him that she was not afraid of him and it did not displease her at all that she should be sought after by such a man.

When she reached the shack, she found that everybody had come in from work. Mistatim's wife was squatting in a corner, with bent head. Her husband was for going back at once and telling his brother what he thought of him.

"Now, now!" said the Bonhomme. "Don't excite yourself, Mistatim! Getting mad might lead to a lot of trouble. Sometimes guns go off by themselves. Stay with us. We shall make up a bed for you both. Straw mattresses are cheap here. Your wife won't be any worse here than at home."

"He can hardly do that, father," Vital said. "Mistatim has a cow to milk, and there's a calf, and some hens, and two horses in his stable."

"Oh, that's another matter!" said the Bonhomme. "It would have been a good thing if that devil, Mahigan, had stuck a couple more knives into his legs! Don't cry! You are more frightened than hurt."

"That is settled, Mistatim," said Vital. "Since you wish it, you shall go home after supper. But remember that you are a Christian!"

Nipsya said nothing. It was time to start for the lake with Alma. The latter, on the way home, related how the young woman had run up to her husband and had fallen exhausted at his feet; she had told him of Mahigan's smoothness as he entered their home, of his attempts to take advantage of her, and of her escape after a desperate struggle.

Then, Nipsya told of her own meeting with him in the bush, concluding:

"But he dared not try anything with me!"

"Why did you not tell us about it at once?"

"You saw that Vital was afraid of a fight between the two brothers," Nipsya replied.

"But you ought to have told Vital by himself."

"He will never speak with me alone."

"Then you ought to have told me, or the Bonhomme."

"I am not sure, yet, that that woman was telling the truth," Nipsya said. "Mahigan didn't seem so bad as they say he is. He said nothing bad to me."

"You don't know him. He is the worst savage in the place," her cousin declared. "You will have to tell Vital about this to-morrow morning."

But as she was falling asleep that night, Nipsya pondered things in her heart.

Chapter XVII

WOMANHOOD

NEXT day, as soon as they reached the meadow, Alma lost no time in running to her brother, who was mowing near the edge of a reed-swamp. She repeated the details which their cousin had confided to her.

Nipsya came slowly, her eyes on the ground, but as she neared Vital she raised her head and flashed him a look of defiance. He had paused. His left hand was gripping the handle of the scythe as he rested it on the ground. With a deliberate movement, he leaned his right elbow on the end of the handle and raised his forearm to support his chin and cheek on his hand; his eyes had grown sombre and unfathomable.

"Is this true, Nipsya?"

"Is what true?"

"That you are not afraid to be with Mahigan?"

"No, I am not afraid!"

"That is all right. You are free, Nipsya."

She had not lowered her eyes before his, but her heart ached. She could have cried out with pain and anger. He had spoken those words coolly, almost harshly—spoken them to her, who for so long had done the best she knew, the best she could, just to

please him; while he, for his part, had never changed his attitude of indifferent friendliness, as if he had made up his mind that she should never be any more to him than any other woman. What more could she do than she had done already? If there still remained something that she ought to have done, why, at least, had he not pointed it out to her? Oughtn't he to have known that she would have done it at once?

She waited for him to say something more, something that would give her an opportunity to answer him and defend herself. She did not want to cry; she must not cry, before him, before Alma! She went in among the tall reeds and stood staring at a pool of water where a yellowish, mossy scum was floating. Would he never speak?

And then, she heard the measured rustling recommence as his scythe struck the grass, and he went on steadily. . . .

After some time, she felt Alma's hand upon her shoulder.

"Don't be angry, Nipsya! Vital is not spiteful. This took him by surprise. I think he was jealous for nothing. You wouldn't want Mahigan for a sweetheart. He is only an Indian! Come and cock some hay! I will have a talk with Vital, myself, since you are afraid."

Nipsya threw herself into the work with a sort of calm fury.

Must she always do everything for him and he do nothing for her? Hadn't she been baptized and a Christian for a long time? If he didn't want her, let him say so! If he did want her, let him stop keeping her at a distance all the time, as if she were a mere Indian and a heathen! If he were jealous of Mahigan, so much the better! Perhaps it would make him speak this time, and then she would know a little more of what he was concealing so well.

The noon meal was silent; the Bonhomme was surprised at the young people's quietness.

"What is wrong? Have you been quarrelling? Bah! You will get over that! When you are as old as I am, you'll laugh at it. Kiss each other, and let there be an end of it!"

Nipsya wished that Vital would follow this advice, but he maintained his taciturn and indifferent expression. With an air of dignity, she got up and went out.

At once, Alma said to her brother:

"Why were you so harsh with her?"

"You heard what she said: she doesn't mind meeting Mahigan!"

"But that doesn't mean a thing," his sister replied. "She didn't seek his company. And now you have hurt her. Why do you never make any advances to her? She is growing tired at last. She loves you very much."

"Oh, you wouldn't understand! I can't do anything in the matter so long as she doesn't see clearly."

"No, I don't understand," said Alma. "If she is not to your taste, show her how she could improve."

"It would be better for her to find that out for herself," her brother answered.

"Vital, my son," said the Bonhomme, "it seems to me you are trying to catch a muskrat with a beartrap. I wasn't so mighty particular when I was courting your mother; and you know how happy we were."

"Yes, father; you did well. But leave me to look after my own affairs, father! I know what I want."

Instinctively, Nipsya had plunged into the warm, peaceful heart of the forest. For a long time, she sat on the moss-covered trunk of a fallen tamarack and wondered what to do. She longed to go back over the lake with her grandmother; she didn't want to work with Vital or be so near to him any longer. Then, perhaps, he might call her back. . . .

Or better still, suppose he could find her in Mahigan's company? In that case, his anger might force him to speak and express things that he would not be able to take back. Was it some such intuition that had impelled her to return to this spot, unconsciously? Oh, if only Mahigan would lend himself

to such a plan, she would come to an understanding with him; she would play him against Vital, seeing that the latter was not incapable of jealousy! . . .

About the middle of the afternoon, as if this desire had had some external influence, or as if Mahigan, knowing the heart of woman, had foreseen her course, Nipsya heard steps that could only be those of a human being, for no other creature would have dared to walk through the forest silence with such boldness. And then, she saw Mahigan coming toward her with ardent, laughing eyes.

He sat down on the tamarack, two feet away from her. She broke off a branch of red dogwood and began stripping off the leaves unconcernedly.

"You are brave, Nipsya!"

"I am not afraid of you, Mahigan!"

"What did they say about me?"

"The truth, very likely!"

"Oh, I was only amusing myself! I wouldn't do my brother's wife any harm. I just wanted to scare her a bit."

"*Hunhun*! It makes no difference to me. With other women, you may do as you like."

"You certainly are brave, Nipsya! Would you scream if I came close?"

"I am not afraid of you, Mahigan," she repeated. "No; don't put your hands on my dress! They are all wet with pembina juice."

"Look! I will wipe them well."

He rubbed them with moss, plucked from the trunk, almost beneath her, while his passionate gaze made her lower her eyes and drove the blood to her cheeks. But she reflected that as a last resource she could always scream. Only, what would they think when they found her here, alone with him again so soon? She hadn't foreseen that. . . . Was that her blood that throbbed so madly in her ears, or was it the muffled drumming of the male partridge that she could hear? . . . Was it the warning of a spirit? It was time she got away. . . .

But she could no longer get away. She was seized suddenly with a terrifying expectancy because Mahigan was now standing close against her knees and she could feel the passionate trembling of his body. She sat motionless, as if fascinated by his eyes, which she could feel devouring her, though she was not looking at them. The man's tense immobility, as he stood before her, communicated to her a mysterious and powerful desire that held her inert.

Suddenly, he moved and threw his arms about her. She sprang to her feet with the virgin's instinctive recoil from the first assault and struggled madly.

"Let me go! Let me go! I'll scream!"

The man, in a moment of surprise, or compassion, released her. She fled like a wounded doe, and he made no attempt to pursue her.

Near the edge of the forest, within fifty feet of the shack, she stopped, out of breath, and leaned against the bole of a white birch. She felt that she had come to the end of her strength, the end of her courage. Scalding tears gathered in her eyes and blinded her. But she was a child no longer. And a woman must not cry! Her left arm tightened about the tree. Her right hand pressed her eyelids to push back those unworthy tears. And her heart . . . her heart was pounding . . . pounding . . . with heavy strokes . . . like a hammer . . . and was stifling her . . . as if . . . she could not ever . . . ever stop it. . . .

She stood thus for a long time, and her heart gradually resumed its normal beat. But the storm was now rising to her brain. . . . What was she to do now? What should she say? Or should she say nothing? But wouldn't they notice that her dress was ripped from neck to shoulder? . . . Should she run away at once, through the forest, to her grandmother? Then they could go back over the lake, together. . . . But that would make them think that she was guilty. . . . Why hadn't she foreseen all these things? But who could have foreseen that? Who could have foreseen that she would come so near giving herself to Mahigan, an Indian? But she need not tell that; no, that she would never tell! . . .

And yet, after all, what did it matter? Let Vital

do as he liked! She had done no wrong. She hadn't wanted to. She had been doing her best for so long, and he had never shown any appreciation. She could not understand him. It must be merely a brotherly affection that he felt for her, domineering, commanding, and watchful for the slightest sign of a weakness in her. But he didn't love her, as she loved him. He had never tried to please her. Oh, well! What ~~matter? She'd go back home~~ with her grandmother. That would displease him, because he always liked people to do as he wanted. But she couldn't remain near him any longer. For a long time she had found his nearness sweet, but at the same time a little bitter, too. Now it was becoming far too hard. He was angry with her. After this affair, he would be angrier still. But there was nothing that she could do about it. No, nothing. It had all happened because it had to happen. She hadn't wanted it to happen; no, truly, she hadn't wanted it to happen! And nothing at all would have happened if he had loved her as she loved him; if he had shown her even a very little love, real love, instead of a carefully-guarded fondness which was nevertheless jealous, even more jealous than her grandmother's affection for her. The latter could get quite angry, but didn't show it so much and, moreover, allowed her absolute freedom of action. To be sure, Vital, too, had said that she might do as she liked, but he had not said

it in her grandmother's resigned tone. He had said it almost harshly. No, she couldn't stay here any longer. It was too hard. It would cause her too much suffering. Oh, well! What matter? She would just go to him and confess what had happened; not *quite* everything; no, but as much as she could. Afterwards, he might say what he liked. He couldn't make her suffer any more than she was suffering now. And then, she would go away. He wouldn't hold her back; she was sure of that. Yes, she would speak; otherwise, they would all believe that she had done wrong. Yes, she must go and face them. But oh, how hard it was!

Meanwhile the sun was going down, and the hour was approaching when her absence would send them in search of her. They must not suspect her of hiding, of being afraid. She must go back of her own accord.

At the door of the shack she stopped. She could get no farther. Her heart began to pound again.

"Come in, child! Come in! Come to your old uncle! Let Vital sulk! He will cool down."

She took another step and leaned against the doorpost. She could not raise her head.

"Whatever has happened to you?" Alma cried, coming over to her. "How did you tear your dress like that?"

"Mahigan did it."

Nobody spoke. She raised her head slightly and, for a moment, met Vital's eyes. She saw in them a dull, smouldering fury and thought that he was going to strike her. But she went on with her confession:

"He wanted to take me. He couldn't."

Vital got up suddenly and demanded:

"Where?"

"Near the little muskeg where the *atocas* grow."

He went out with his noiseless tread. His walk was like a slow run, without swing or jerk, and the weight of his heavy, lithe body seemed scarcely ever to rest upon his heels.

"Don't go killing him!" shouted Cléophas; then, to Nipsya, he said gently:

"Poor little thing! Don't be afraid! Vital will settle that scoundrel. He won't bother you any more."

"I am going back home with grandmother."

"Isn't that rather foolish? When I tell you that he won't bother you again?"

"It is not because of Mahigan."

"Oh, I see! Well, at any rate, wait until Vital comes back. Perhaps this will cure his bad temper and you will be good friends as before."

"No, I can not stay with Vital any longer. I want to go home with grandmother."

"Bah! Mere boy-and-girl squabbles! They don't last. Just wait for Vital!"

"No," said Nipsya. "If he wants to see me, he can come after me."

She went back to the big white house with Alma at the usual time. She answered most of her cousin's questions in a tone of sorrowful resignation, but some she would not answer at all.

When she told her grandmother what she wanted to do, the latter regarded her with a grave kindliness.

"I told you so, child. Vital has been educated by the Black-Robes. They intended to make him one of themselves. He can not find his own ideas in you"

The next morning, she and her grandmother found themselves back in their own home, on the north shore of the lake.

END OF PART ONE

PART TWO

Chapter I

SPELL OF MUSIC

ON the day after Nipsya and her grandmother had left the Lajeunesse home, the Bonhomme and Alma crossed the lake, bringing various provisions according to the agreement that had been made. The Bonhomme did his best to persuade his niece and her grandmother to return to the big white house.

"You have nothing to fear from Mahigan," he told Nipsya, "though Vital didn't maul him too much—merely dislocated one of his arms. Don't worry! That shows my lad thinks something of you!"

"He didn't come with you," Nipsya said quietly.

"He is too proud for that. But there is too much pride about you, too, my dear girl! Now just come back home with us! You are only young folks. You will get over it."

But neither his encouraging friendliness, nor Alma's pressing and less diplomatic invitations had any effect on Nipsya's discouraged and aching heart.

During the week that followed, Nipsya helped her grandmother gather their annual supply of fruit, and as there had been no late, heavy frost in the

spring, they found plenty. In places close to the lake, the prickly gooseberry bushes were laden with green or purple berries. In the damp sloughs and on the thick moss of the muskegs, red with *atocas* that were yet too hard and bitter, they picked black currants and sometimes white, purple, and red currants as well, that had not too bad a flavour. Small red cherries and bunches of black choke-cherries glistened on the sunny slopes, blueberries were plentiful in the sandy soil where pines flourished, and beneath the arches of the vast forest, *pembinas* and *graines d'orignal* displayed their umbels of scarlet berries so much enjoyed by partridges and all the other winged folk of the woods.

At that season, though the days were shortening rapidly, the afternoon sun was still very warm, so the berries were spread out on flat rocks to dry.

The nights, illumined at times by the northern lights, were growing longer and colder. The old woman now lit a fire in the stone fireplace of the shack. One morning, Nipsya discovered a thin sheet of ice on the pail of water which had been left outside the door; and that same day, she took her two largest baskets of woven bark to the nearest muskeg. Selecting a spot where there was nothing but moss, she picked the best of it and filled both baskets. The next day, she went to the white marl-pit, not far from the Hudson's Bay post, and brought back as

much marl as she could carry. On the third day, she was busy stopping all the cracks in the walls of the shack, first stuffing them with dried moss, and then applying the marl-paste in generous layers.

She had just finished this task, when she heard the ring of axes in the forest, on the east. She concluded that it must be white men.

After dusk, she went to investigate.

She was able to steal along as cunningly as any forest animal, gliding through the underbrush nimbly and noiselessly without fear of being discovered. Besides, the wind was blowing from the east; it was singing in the tree tops, filling all the woods with a grand and solemn harmony; while the waves were beating incessantly upon the shore. There was no moon, but the stars hung tremulous above the night, the sky being clear, as it usually is at that season and in that country, where shadows remain transparent even under the high arches of the close-growing poplars.

Nipsya's practised ear had been able to tell almost exactly whence had come the ring of axes, but before reaching that spot she was surprised to hear a sound which, at first, she did not recognise. Mingling with the murmurs of the wind, it was like a human voice, the voice of a woman, weeping. But almost at once, the ripples of mournful sound widened, with a more marked vibration than any human

throat could have produced, and Nipsya's heart throbbed strangely in response.

Among the dark tree boles, not far away, she saw the reflection of a fire. She stole along, close to where the firelight faded into shadow, until she reached a thick clump of *pêmbinas*, burdened with clusters of red fruit. There, she stood still, parting the branches.

In a little clearing that had been made recently, a fire was lighting up the poplars in front of her. The very pale green of their bark was beginning to be flecked with a white powder. Higher up, the firelight was crimsoning the underside of their leaves, many of which had already turned yellow. Nipsya noticed these details and many others, but was more interested in the four people who sat around the fire, in front of a square tent resembling a house with a gabled roof: this kind of tent was new to Nipsya. Two of the men, evidently gentlemen, were strangers to her; one of them was wearing two small yellow-framed glasses on the bridge of his nose, she knew not why. Strangers, also, were the two women, who were far more amazingly dressed than any human being she had ever dreamed of, and who must be great ladies. But even these did not attract so much of her attention as did the tall young man, clean-shaven, and fair almost to sandiness, who sat before the opening of the tent. His shirt was open at the

neck, his sleeves rolled to the elbows. His blue cloth trousers were drawn in at the waist with a broad black leather belt and encased, below the knee, in leggings of a lighter shade than his brown shoes. It was Monsieur Alec.

Most interesting of all was the peculiar kind of box which he was supporting with his chin and his left hand; there were four parallel strings stretched along the top of it, and his right hand was drawing a rod across them. That was what produced the extraordinary and wonderful sounds that made her heart throb and her throat contract. He was playing a slow, solemn melody and Nipsya felt her sadness increase until tears gathered in her eyes. Since reaching adolescence, she had never allowed herself to weep, even with grief; but this time, she experienced neither shame nor weakness. These tears were sweet and she made no effort to repress them. Each note seemed to fall into the very centre of her being, causing ever-widening ripples until it seemed that her heart could no longer contain them. Her lips half parted. She wished that she might mingle her voice with those waves of sweet sound, so pure, so powerful, that they must be the supreme expression of the harmony of the universe. But for that very real fire, that tent, those human beings of familiar flesh, she would not have believed that she was in any earthly place.

The melody ended in a sort of call, low, tremulous, prolonged, like a far-off voice in the forest. Monsieur Alec let fall the hand that held the bow, and gazed into the fire, with the violin still beneath his chin.

"Give us a dance, now, Alec!" said one of the women.

She had spoken in English, and Nipsya, who knew very little of this language, had barely understood the few words.

Monsieur Alec smiled at the speaker and at once a different livelier music captured Nipsya, disturbing her delicious immobility and exciting her limbs and feet until she almost stamped. She had never experienced anything like this before. She had danced a few Indian dances to the clapping of hands or beating of drums, but these new measures, accompanied by melodies like tempting voices, were almost bewitching.

When the music stopped, she realised with dismay and uneasiness that for a whole hour she had quite forgotten her great grief of the past few days, that inward pain which she had thought would burden her heart as long as she lived.

Why had she not heard about Monsieur Alec's extraordinary gift? She had heard that he was good at the violin, but nobody had seemed to attach any importance to that. She would never have believed

that it could be so marvellous. Could it be that she alone, of all the lake people, knew how to appreciate his music properly? Or did he only play like that when he was with ladies and other gentlemen like himself?

But the others had begun talking now. Nipsya did not understand much of what was said.

"We can only stay two days—long enough to get a supply of ducks and fish."

"If you had let me know," said Monsieur Alec, "I might have been able to fix up a room for you at the post."

"No, no! It's much more fun camping out."

"As to ducks," the factor went on, "however amateurish you may be, you'll always kill enough. But you would do better to buy the fish from the Métis. They'd sell it cheaply."

"Oh, no! We'd rather catch it ourselves."

"Well, you won't catch much with a hook in two days. I would advise you to hire nets. There are two women, living a few minutes' walk from here, who have some. I'll come back early to-morrow and we'll go to see them."

"We don't want to put you to any trouble, Alec, or take up your time."

He laughed.

"Do you think my job's like that of an Edmonton bookkeeper, who works by schedule? I have rules to

suit myself. Besides, those two women don't speak English. How would you manage without me? What a pity Flora couldn't come with you! I brought my violin especially for her."

"It simply couldn't be managed. School teachers have to stay on the job until the third week in November."

Nipsya had waited in the hope that the violin music would begin again. But she saw Monsieur Alec shake hands and turn in the direction of the post trail. Then, noiselessly, she stole away, her nerves still quivering.

She was a long time falling asleep, and as she lived over again those hours of music, her sufferings of the preceding days grew less acute. The snatches of beautiful melody which her memory had retained were to her as soothing ointment on a raw wound.

The next morning, while performing her ablutions on a broad, flat rock out in the water, which she had reached by means of two smaller stepping-stones, Nipsya heard her name called, and, turning round, saw her grandmother at the door of the shack, beckoning her to come quickly. Surprised at this unusual behaviour, she hurried back, and found Monsieur Alec and the four strangers from the city. Not one of the men had removed his hat, but Nipsya attached no importance to this detail.

The factor explained in French:

"These ladies and gentlemen are from Edmonton. They would like to hire your canoe and one or two of your nets for a day, but I must warn you beforehand, Nipsya, that they are not experts. You had better go with them and show them how to handle them. You shall be well paid."

This proposition did not please her much: she preferred solitude in these days. She did not know what to answer, though they all pressed her to accept, the men showing her bank-notes—she was ignorant of their value—the women saying a thousand things to her that she did not understand at all.

Her grandmother answered her glance:

"White people of this class always pay well, my child. Accept and ask five dollars a day."

Finally, they came to an agreement, and while the men returned on foot, the two women went with Nipsya and the nets in the canoe. She thought that they talked and laughed too much, made too much noise, as if all Nature belonged to them. They seemed sadly lacking in respect for the hidden ruling powers of the lake and forest. And everything surprised them, as Nipsya knew by their eyes and gestures. Often, they asked her questions, but she went on paddling, without answering. She divined pretty well what they were asking, but did not want to have any part in their sudden bursts of unseemly

chatter or childish laughter. Also, she was amazed at their evident ignorance, for she had imagined that ladies such as these would know far more about everything than did she, herself.

At the mid-day meal, Monsieur Alec had little to say to her, but afterwards, when one of the men began playing the violin, she had the same deep joy of the previous night, though she did not find the same charm in his playing. But soon he passed the instrument to Monsieur Alec, and again she felt herself being borne away to wondrous realms. She tried hard to conceal her emotion, but at times it was too strong. Her lips would part in spite of her, and her eyes fill with tears. One of the women said, amusedly:

"Look at that little Indian girl!"

But Monsieur Alec had noticed everything and was secretly trying his power over her.

Chapter II

MONSIEUR ALEC

TWO days after the departure of the Edmonton visitors, on a dull afternoon when the sun was obscured by a thick haze, the factor appeared at the door of Nipsya's home, carrying his violin. Her grandmother studied him with cool, appraising eyes.

"Come in! We have no chairs, but there are blocks."

Nipsya was more polite; she brought the birch-stump with three roots, that served as a stool, and set it near the table for him.

"I saw that you love music, Nipsya," he said.

She looked up at him. He was smiling, but there was an expression of serious sympathy in his light blue eyes. She made no answer.

"I heard that you had left the Lajeunesse family before the end of the haying, and also I heard that Vital had had a fight with Mahigan."

Again, she made no reply.

"I have lots of spare time. Would you like me to come and play to you sometimes?"

"I do not know."

"Don't be afraid of me, Nipsya. I have no evil intentions. I thought that you were unhappy and

that I could take your mind off things a little. Would you like me to play my violin?"

"Yes, monsieur."

As he whiled away a very happy hour for her, he watched her with his steady, smiling eyes. His playing made her reveal herself unconsciously, so that he soon knew what parts of her soul he must touch in order to stir her, and with what key he could unlock her heart to glimpse its innermost secrets.

"Let us go outside for a little talk!" he said, when he had finished playing. "These autumn days are like you, Nipsya, lovely and solemn. They ought to agree with you."

She did not quite understand his compliment and dared not refuse to do as he had suggested. They went outside and sat on the grass, on the east side of the cabin.

"You need not be afraid of me, Nipsya," the factor said again. "You can see quite well that I have no intention of acting as Mahigan did, although I could have taken you by surprise, myself, when you were gathering moose-berries last week. I saw you alone in the bush, on the south side of the post. But, you see, I have come to your home."

In spite of the frankness in his eyes and in his tone, she mistrusted him. Why should he, a gentleman, come to see her? As she kept her head bent, he divined her thoughts.

"I have come to see you because I am tired of being over there alone. Besides, no one but you seems to have appreciated my music much, so if I come here, I give you pleasure and you give me pleasure. You see?"

"Not quite."

He laughed.

"You are very exacting, Nipsya! You would like to see the invisible. Do even I know what drove me here? But what does it matter? I have one more hour of freedom. Let us make the most of it! Life passes like the autumn leaf, but we can always make a little happiness for ourselves when we want to, can't we?"

"I do not know."

"Oh, yes! We only have to want hard enough."

"With you, it is not the same," said Nipsya.

"No? I, too, could find countless reasons for being sad if I looked for them, but we can make happiness for ourselves even in the midst of sadness. See how sad Nature is at this moment! And yet, isn't she lovely to look upon?"

Nipsya looked about her in surprise.

On her left, beyond the tall birch, which was turning yellow but retained a few green leaves even yet, the lake reflected a wan grey sky in which the invisible sun made a large, dim halo in the south-west. Beyond the lake, hills and forests formed a

vast, motionless undulation, yellow as gold, with dark patches of spruce and pine. Nipsya compared that landscape to an immense moosehide, freshly-tanned, and ornamented with designs in different shades of red and green.

On her right, at the back of the cabin, a large and solitary balsam-poplar, that thrived on refuse, still retained its summer foliage, which looked almost black against the yellows, saffrons, and flaming crimsons of the vast forest. But even in the forest, a few of the more deeply-rooted trees had kept their verdure. In the hollows, tall, sombre spruces, slender as cypresses, were silhouetted against the coloured border, while willows everywhere added their varied tints of foliage and bark.

Nearer to where they sat, the grass was turning yellow and above it rose the stems of fireweed, whose pink seedpods had opened to release their masses of long, silken, silver threads. Large blue, star-shaped flowers, like wild chicory, on stalks of bronzed crimson, mingled with tiny pink daisies, white-flowered "goose-grass," and purple thistles, while close to the low-growing *symphorine* bushes with their numerous little snowballs, were the scarlet hips of the wild rose.

"Isn't this ending of things mournful?" the young man went on. "Doesn't that tree look sad, with almost all its leaves gone already!"

"A tree can not be sad!" said Nipsya, a little scornfully.

"What! Doesn't it move you to see beautiful Nature dying and about to be covered over with a shroud of snow through such a long winter?"

"She is not dying. Winter is a good thing."

"Ah, little girl, you are not a bit sentimental about Nature! You see things too much as they are. You must learn to attribute to them the feelings of human beings."

"Why?" asked Nipsya.

"Why? Why, because . . . because everyone does that to-day."

"But why?" she asked again.

"Yes, why, indeed?" Mr. Alec repeated. "It's certainly queer."

Monsieur Alec, who at times was a poet, began to meditate. He had always, unconsciously, attributed his own sensations to inanimate objects and had honestly thought that the rain was sad and the sun happy, that spring was gay and autumn melancholy. And here, a little half-Indian girl was showing him new perspectives! His mistake, he reflected, was probably due to man's habit of always regarding himself as the centre of the universe, judging everything only in its relation to himself, imagining that that which displeased him could only be harmful and sad, while that which pleased him must

be joyous and good. But was it right to think of Nature thus? The discovery interested him so deeply that he took leave of Nipsya abruptly, and went back to the post to consider the matter at his leisure, in the solitude of his room.

Nipsya did not mind his going in the least, since he was no longer in the mood for playing his violin. His conversation made her uncomfortable. To begin with, she could not perceive his purpose, and she disapproved of anyone's wasting time like that, discussing such vague things without any definite object. Moreover, although she had made good progress with her French in the past two months, Monsieur Alec's too-elegant pronunciation not only made it difficult for her to understand him, but aroused in her a sense of inferiority, which annoyed her very much.

As they were finishing their supper, her grandmother said to her:

"Be careful, child! He is more dangerous than any Cree."

"O grandmother! He is a gentleman!"

'*Hunhun*!"

"So long as he comes here, it is all right," said Nipsya.

"I was no worse than any other girl, my dear. I had two white husbands, and both of them abandoned me."

"Yes, but it is different with me, grandmother. I can't love anyone any more now."

"*Hunhun*! We never know, child. What must be, will be."

Her eyes resumed their faraway expression, as if intent on things hidden from Nipsya.

Chapter III

THE FACTOR GAINS FAVOUR

TWO days later, Monsieur Alec called again. A cold wind was blowing from the north, whirling the round yellow leaves from the poplars in thick, rustling showers. Most of the trees were stripped already.

They stayed indoors, and Nipsya felt more at ease. The factor tried to win over her grandmother by being pleasant, but it was a wasted effort. In addition to his violin, he had brought a beautifully-illustrated book, and he alternated music with conversation in which, this time, the girl showed more interest. She grew more talkative and gave him further surprises.

Among the illustrations was a reproduction of an Old World masterpiece in which the artist had tried to portray the beauty of a forest nook. What struck Nipsya in particular was that these strange trees were more massive than those with which she was familiar and had wide spreading tops. She wanted to know what kind of trees they were and how they grew. Why weren't they tall and slender as were almost all the trees in the Cree country? But Monsieur Alec had no great knowledge of botany and had to confess it.

"It does not matter what their names are, or how they live," he told her. "It's the beauty of the picture that is remarkable."

"I do not think it is very beautiful. It is not alive."

"But don't you think that the artist has pictured the trees well?" he asked.

"I don't know. I like real trees better."

This illiterate girl was not only amusing him: she was instructing him. Until now, he had never thought to question theories which, as self-evident truths, had been made the basis of civilisation, but in the face of this girl's primitive questions, he was beginning to doubt the wisdom of centuries.

Moreover, Nipsya's questions were not asked with the simple curiosity of a child. Usually, she accepted his explanations as he gave them, without interrupting him. She seemed to understand the white men's superiority in agriculture, cattle-raising, manufacturing, even in war, or again, in religion which inspired them to erect with ordinary stones such beautiful buildings for the Great Spirit. But when she saw the picture of a large city with tall factory chimneys, she wanted to know why men preferred to live a life of strenuous and monotonous toil, herded together in such masses. And when he had finished his explanation of this, it was quite evident that Nipsya would not have exchanged her humble home for the finest mansion in Paris, London, or

New York. Not that she had voiced any opinion. But the very form of her questions had indicated plainly those things that were not in accordance with her concept of a truly human life.

What astonished the factor was that he found himself obliged to weigh in his own mind first, before attempting to justify them to Nipsya, a number of ideas which he had always accepted without question. He came to the conclusion that he was not wasting his time after all—that perhaps he was learning more than he was teaching.

Nipsya, too, found this conversation worth while, for besides yielding her a great deal of useful information, it kept her from dwelling upon her sorrow. And yet, it was an added bitterness to think that Vital could have done her this very service, and had not. But when she heard the violin, everything in the outer world faded away and she lived an inner life, so sweet that nothing troubled her any longer. Yes, Monsieur Alec had by far the best potion: it lulled her love to sleep and healed her griefs.

When they parted, a little before dusk, they had discovered in their widely-different personalities a certain sympathy that had drawn them closer together, their very differences helping them to know each other better.

The factor's visits grew more frequent.

Nipsya was sure now that he had no evil intention, and that if there was a tender light in his eyes it was because he pitied her without daring to tell her so.

On one occasion, he met her alone in the bush, whither she had gone to gather the winter's supply of dry wood, but instead of hindering her, as many another young man might have done, he took the axe from her and helped her all the afternoon. He talked to her, of course, but without wasting any time, and he shouldered stumps that few men could have lifted, so that the work was not only done more quickly, but their conversation made it more interesting for both, even though they were not always in agreement.

"Look, Nipsya! I am representing the British Empire now. Just as I am carrying three or four times as much wood as you, so Britain carries three or four times as many useful things in the world as any other nation. And the Hudson's Bay Company does the same in the North-West."

"Yes, but why do they seize all the land?"

"Well, they can't allow such a vast country to remain barren."

"It is not barren! It is full of lakes and forests."

"But wouldn't it be more profitable if it were

governed and cultivated as the old countries are?" he asked.

"Its life would not be the same," she replied.

"No, obviously not. You wouldn't find your familiar spirits here any more. I am afraid your manitous will disappear before long, as did the gods of ancient times."

"My cousin Vital thinks that Riel will protect the country from the British."

"Oh, Riel!" he said, scornfully. "We will sweep him aside as we did in Manitoba. He is a dangerous traitor, that man! If he is captured, he won't last long. No, little girl, nothing can stop England when she makes up her mind to do something, and the Ottawa Government works with that of London. . . . Within a year from now, most likely, the railroad will extend right across Cañada, from ocean to ocean. Settlers will come in large bands. Edmonton will become a great city with tall factory chimneys, like the picture you saw in the book."

"Grandmother doesn't think the trains will come into the Cree country."

He smiled.

"Naturally! But what does your cousin think?"

He had seated himself on the pile of wood after throwing down their last load. His head was bent, and he was passing his finger along the edge of the axe. Nipsya made no reply. She did not like to have

Vital's name mentioned; and, furthermore, she fancied that she had detected a more alert curiosity in his eyes. Was he trying to make her disclose what she knew of the preparations of her cousin and the others? The factor laughed.

"You're a loyal friend, little girl, and a discreet one, too! I thought as much, but I wanted proof of it."

Nipsya was flattered by this favourable interpretation of her silence and her eyes softened. But he went on, teasingly:

"Are you as discreet with your cousin Alma?"

Immediately, she lowered her eyes, with a slight blush. She knew quite well what he meant.

"Yes, your cousin Alma came over the lake yesterday. She told you that everybody was talking about the factor's visits to your grandmother's; that it was not proper; that it ought not to happen again. And you told her that that was your business; or else, you made no answer at all. Am I right?"

She did not look up. She was standing in front of him, her hands clasped behind her back, the toe of one foot burrowing into the thick golden carpet of dead leaves.

"Surely I have the right to do as I please, so long as I do nothing wrong?" she said.

"No, you are not doing anything wrong," he assured her. "I am no worse than your cousin. If he

wants to hold you, let him take the trouble to do so! For such a nice child as you; a man should do something."

She was of the same opinion, and thought that Monsieur Alec was much kinder than Vital. Why hadn't the latter treated her thus? Then she and her grandmother would have stayed on at the big white house.

"Haven't I, also, the right to try to please you?" the factor went on. "Is it wrong to open your mind to good and beautiful ideas? It is true, I have no love for the priests or for their religion, but I don't speak ill of them. And you are not obliged to believe what they say, anyway. There should be freedom of thought for everyone. Do you think I ought to stop coming?"

"No."

Chapter IV

NIPSYA IS CONSOLED

MONSIEUR ALEC'S visits did not cease. The middle of October brought the first snowfall, but it was damp and slushy and disappeared almost at once. Game was easier to find now that all the trees and shrubs were bare and the weight of the snowfall had flattened the tall grasses. The year's ducks had grown to their full size and plumpness, and they came in large flocks among the reeds, not far from the shack. In the woods, the rabbits were donning their white winter coats. Quite often, now, the factor would bring, with his violin, a light rifle which Nipsya had soon learned to handle. The old dog would fetch home the ducks which they shot on the lake, and he could make the partridges settle, too. The latter, intent on pecking buds, would watch him barking at the foot of the tree until a shot had singled out the plumpest; and even then, their stupor was such that Nipsya could shoot two or three more before the rest took to wing.

At that time of the year, it often froze at night, so that the game, hanging behind the shack out of the sun, was in no danger of spoiling. It was only necessary to protect it from the plunderings of mag-

pies, weasels, squirrels, and skunks, and the dog saw to that. One morning, when the light snowfall of the previous day had remained on the ground, Nipsya discovered the tracks of a coyote at the edge of the bush; but the animal had not ventured any nearer.

After the first few days of November, Monsieur Alec no longer came in the afternoon. The Indians and Métis of the district were already bringing him muskrat skins which, they claimed, had been left over from the previous winter. As they were not of good quality, he refused them ruthlessly. He was obliged to remain at the post because old Beaudoin, who kept the books during his absence, was too easily imposed upon by the Indians.

So he fell into the habit of coming to Nipsya's at night. He had brought them a small oil-lamp, and even the grandmother found its light much better than that of the fire, or the smoky candles of tallow and resin which were in common use among the natives. Often, he brought them dried raisins, too, which were better than saskatoons, besides supplying the sugar and flour for the meal which they had together before he left.

These hours of comradeship were sweet to Nipsya. All her former mistrust had vanished. Her grandmother seemed to have changed her opinion, too, and

was less hostile, though she retained her grave expression. The factor, if he was often playful, had always shown a serious character and treated both women with respect. Slowly and patiently, he had overcome Nipsya's timidity. She ventured now to ask him for the tunes she liked best, and when they conversed, asked many questions and no longer allowed him to wander from one subject to another but brought him back to those that pleased her. In these days, she preferred the great love stories which men have immortalized in song. So he told her about Helen, Penelope, Dido, Lucretia, Desdemona, Phaedra, and Marguerite. Such a vast world he opened up to her, as diverse as the teeming life and ruling powers of the lakes and forests, and almost as soul-stirring as music.

Like those careless travellers who build a fire in virgin forest without foreseeing that a spark falling on the dry moss might start a blaze that would devastate a whole region and destroy themselves, too, the factor warmed himself at the fire which he was kindling in Nipsya's soul. Whenever he saw her grave, dark eyes light up before his and her red lips part unconsciously, he trembled at the intensity of feeling which he was awakening. He became intoxicated with his power over this child. Not only with his violin, but with his voice, he was moulding her to his will, as easily as the changing waters of

the lake were affected by the influence of sun and wind.

Outside in the darkness, when bidding her "good-night," he would take her trembling hand. She would lower her head shyly, and for a little while they would remain thus, saying nothing, listening to the voices of the silence and the furtive movements of creatures that waken at nightfall, pursuing and pursued. They would inhale the dank fragrance of the half-frozen forest, and admire the loveliness of earth and sky, sometimes bathed in a faint radiance, at other times alive with shifting northern lights, or tranquil in the serene light of the moon.

There would be a light on the south-east shore of the lake, and Nipsya would wonder what Vital might be thinking, though she scarcely missed him any more. Her present experience was sweet and consoling. Sometimes in her dreams, and every morning when she awoke she would hear again the tones of Monsieur Alec's violin and the music of his voice; she would see his eyes, smiling, serious, tender. She knew that this time she was loved with the love for which she had longed, loved wholly for herself, just as she was.

She would think over his words of the previous night; she would feel again the lingering, gentle pressure of his strong hand before the final hard clasp of farewell, and recall the sweetness of his

tender "Good-bye, little one!" before he vanished swiftly into the bush, in the direction of the post trail. She never ceased to marvel at the knowledge which was unfolding before her and which, to her mind, resembled the kaleidoscopic and unfathomable northern lights. Every evening, with the aid of his illustrated books, Monsieur Alec had shown her yet another garden with its lovely human flowers of the past or of the present: the whole story of man's endeavours in other countries about which, hitherto, she had had but vague ideas.

She was no longer sure where lay the truth. Was it better for her country to follow its ancient, primitive destiny, as the Crees wished? Or would it not be better to allow the white races to work out their destinies in this vast, virgin territory, as they had done in other parts of the world—enact the same great dramas, make the same feverish conquests with all the blood and tears that came in their wake? She was no longer sure which was to be preferred: her country of lakes and forests, where scattered human beings worshipped hidden powers and led a rude and simple life; or the old crowded nations who destroyed Nature to make room for their ambitious structures of stone and steel, in a perpetual, awful conflict, a conflict wherein cries of lamentation mingled with songs of triumph, but which was so impressive in the majesty of its endeavour.

She would emerge from these reveries feeling saddened and uneasy. Such ideas seemed a betrayal of her cousin, her grandmother, her entire race. She ought not to have taken such pleasure in them. She must not yield to them any more. But it was very difficult to keep this resolution. Such thoughts, in spite of herself, recurred again and again.

Chapter V

A SECRET MEETING

SUDDENLY, in the middle of November, the factor's visits ceased.

The ground was now freezing during the long nights. Almost every plant had withered long ago, or been stripped of leaves. Only the stalks of a few grasses at the edge of the lake remained alive, while the only green things left in the forest were the mosses and a few low-growing plants with large, round, thick leaves; in the muskegs, there remained only the sombre *ledums* and the small glistening leaves of the *atocas*.

All that week, Nipsya wandered aimlessly about the shack. The last light snowfall had not melted. She visited her snares and traps, but did not feel the same interest in them as she had in previous years. Her best catches gave her little pleasure, even a wolverine leaving her almost indifferent.

The sun rose late now, and set early, tracing an arc low down in the south. As soon as it had disappeared, the ice could be heard cracking on the Plus Grand Lac des Aigles, which is not very deep and therefore freezes over quickly.

Each evening, Nipsya remained out of doors until

late, listening to every sound until she had lost all hope of hearing the one sound for which she waited, when she would return home, numb with cold.

She felt a growing desire to make some purchases at the post, but would not venture there in daylight for fear of mocking eyes and tongues.

The last Monday in the month brought a little more snow. After dusk, Nipsya hesitated a long time, until her desire grew too strong to resist and she decided to go. As her round snowshoes would leave tracks, she thought she had better take her canoe. There was already quite a little ice close to the lake shore, but the swifter waters of the creek near the post ought to be free. She carried her light birch canoe to the other side of the broad, flat rock where she usually washed during the summer. Here there was no ice, and she pushed off.

On reaching the end of the lake, she saw that the store was lit up, and that a cloud of smoke was issuing from the roof of the employes' quarters. She beached her canoe at the mouth of the creek, a good way from the post, and then stood for a moment, listening. Not a sound of voices. With throbbing heart, she approached the outer gate and entered the yard. All was quiet and deserted. Looking through the window of the store, she saw Monsieur Alec sitting beside the stove, all alone, his head in his hands. Softly, she opened the door.

"You!" he exclaimed, in a stifled voice.

"Grandmother had no salt, and I had no more visits."

She regarded him with a happy smile. He seemed surprised and uncertain what to do next.

"Come inside, quickly!"

He went to the door and, after peering all round the yard, closed it. Then he came back and watched her as she warmed her hands at the fire.

"Do you know what people might say if they saw you here at this hour?" he asked.

"Yes, but I couldn't stay away any longer without knowing why you didn't come."

He was silent for a moment and seemed in deep thought.

"Listen! You are going up to my room and you shan't leave until the men are asleep. I will walk in your tracks as far as the creek, and then nobody will be any the wiser."

"Yes," she agreed, still regarding him with happy, serious eyes.

"Come quickly!"

She followed him upstairs to a cold, dark room.

"Wait for me!" he said. "I will go and tell the men that I am closing the store."

He was not long away. When he came back, he covered the window, then lit the lamp. Nipsya noticed that all the time he had a preoccupied expres-

sion. Still without speaking, he lit a fire in the small camp-stove, then, drawing the one chair close to it, made her sit there. She saw plainly that he was displeased at her coming, but thought that this mood would not last. She examined everything around her. Monsieur Alec was sitting on a narrow bed, and she could see the steel springs of the mattress under the grey blankets. There was a small chest of drawers with a wash-basin upon it and an oval mirror above it, while above the latter a few photographs and prints of beautiful, scantily-dressed women were arranged fan-wise on the marl-plastered wall.

At last, he said, in a low voice:

"I scarcely have time to come and see you any more, Nipsya, but you mustn't bear me any ill-feeling."

"I do not."

"You're a dear child! But what made you commit this indiscretion?"

"I couldn't stay away any longer without knowing why you didn't come," she said again.

"But you ought to have known that the fur-trading would begin with the cold weather and the snow."

"Yes, but not after dark."

"At night, I have the book-keeping to do," he explained. "Then there's the annual inventory. And

I am going down to Edmonton to-morrow. I have no time at all any more."

"I didn't know. I am quite satisfied now that I know," she said. "I was afraid."

"Afraid of what? That I no longer loved you? But I shall love you always, my little wildflower, even if I marry another woman."

She smiled, still regarding him happily. She knew quite well that white men did not marry two women. And yet, he was not growing playful and tender as on previous occasions.

"Tell me, foolish child: weren't you the least bit afraid to come here?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I wouldn't have liked anyone to ridicule me."

"But weren't you afraid that I might do as Mahigan did? You wouldn't dare scream here."

She looked at him in surprise.

"You are not Mahigan. You are a gentleman."

"Nevertheless, you know that I love you in every way," he said.

"Yes; and that is why you treat me with respect."

She smiled tranquilly, her eyes resting upon him with the soft light they always held when their conversation touched upon love. It surprised him that he had not gone farther with this child of Nature. However, if he wanted. . . ?

"But what about you, Nipsya? Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"Then why not do as others do and take advantage of a good opportunity?"

There was a pause. For a fleeting instant she recalled the mysterious emotion that had seized her when Mahigan had stood before her. Her heart throbbed violently; her cheeks burned at the memory. Then she said, in a low voice:

"You are not like other men."

"No. And perhaps I am very foolish. What is to hinder us? The Great Spirit's forbiddance?"

At the mention of the Great Spirit, she grew calmer, and raised her head again.

"Yes."

"But are you quite sure that there is a Great Spirit?" he asked.

"Yes."

"But if He really exists, why doesn't He put a stop to all evil? Why does He allow men to suffer and die? Why doesn't He give them a long, painless life such as stones and trees have? If He wants us to do His will, why doesn't He speak clearly?"

"I don't know," she answered.

"No! Nor does anyone else, it seems. Perhaps because there isn't any Great Spirit. Perhaps because He is only a concept invented by men to explain the origin and evolution of life."

Nipsya was silent.

"Why should we have to be good if He, Himself, is not good?" the factor continued.

"I don't know, but we must."

"But suppose that that is all nonsense? If we can have a moment's happiness now, why refuse it?"

"That would not be happiness."

She was listening to him with the same sweet expression in her eyes, the same tranquil, happy smile. She had been so absolutely safe with Monsieur Alec during those two months, that she had lost the distrust that had once possessed her.

"What would you call happiness, then?" he asked her.

"When you tell me of beautiful things and play the violin," she answered.

Yes. It was just as he had thought. She loved his talent, his culture, his refinement. He was not awakening the mastering passion at all. He realized, also, that he, for his part, loved her seriousness, her hunger for knowledge, her sweet nature, her soul's thirst for love. He was strongly tempted to overstep the line he had marked out for himself. She loved him enough to sacrifice herself to all his desires, if he wanted her passionately. She would be an easy prey. But, as she had said, that would not be happiness. He would only fall, in her eyes, to the level of other men. If she was an honest girl, he was descended from a line of gentlemen. Recovering his

self-control, he sought among his books for a fresh topic of conversation: he was "Monsieur Alec" once more.

An hour later, under cover of the darkness, he took her back to her canoe.

Chapter VI

DISILLUSIONMENT

ONE afternoon, toward the end of that week, Alma came over the lake. The shore ice had thickened. She smashed its outer edge with an oar until she was sure that she could step on it without fear of its giving way beneath her.

After giving her grandmother the provisions she had brought, she asked Nipsya to come outside. Wearing their muskrat caps and wrapped in their blankets, for it was a cold day, they went down to the beach where the high bank sheltered them from the light but icy north wind.

"Do you still see the factor?" Alma enquired.

"No."

"Did you know that he was coming back from Edmonton this afternoon?"

"No."

"Did you know that he was married the day before yesterday?"

Nipsya was unable to answer. She crouched in the snow.

"Did you know that he was to give a dance to-night?"

Nipsya remained motionless. Her eyes stared fixedly into the distance, beyond the lake.

"Speak to me, Nipsya! Don't you know anything at all? Did you think that he intended to marry you? Surely you didn't give yourself to him? Say something! You frighten me."

"I did not."

"We were afraid you had, because you were seen together so often, at this very spot. But what ails you, then?"

"Nothing!"

"Is it possible that you really loved him? For the love of Heaven! Only speak!"

"Who told you those things? Are they true?"

"Vital told me. He was in Edmonton at the same time as the factor. He has just come back, and he sent me here at once to let you know."

"It's all right."

She got up and went back to the shack. She lay down on the bed with her face to the wall, and hid herself completely under the buffalo-robe.

"Whatever have you done to her, Alma?" her grandmother asked.

"I have just told her that Monsieur Alec is married. He is giving a dance to-night, and the news will be made public. I didn't think it would cause her so much pain."

"*Hunhun*! Leave her!"

When Alma had gone, though very reluctantly, the old woman said:

"Are you going?"

But Nipsya made no answer. The robe remained as motionless as if it had covered a corpse.

"I was abandoned twice, myself, child, and I am living yet. We remember the joys when the sorrows are forgotten. He meant well. You looked for too much."

Nipsya threw back the robe and sat up. Her face was quite white and her eyes seemed to see nothing. She sat thus for a long time. Then she got up and changed her everyday dress for one of white leather ornamented with beautiful designs, some of which had been made with dyes, others with pearls. She took out her prettiest moccasins, smoothed the fur of her cap and coat, braided her hair with care, and replaced her tortoise-shell comb. At times she stood motionless, with staring eyes, or went and sat beside the fire, fixing her gaze on the dancing flames as she warmed her hands.

"You ought not to go over there, child. My *médecine* warns me that you will be in danger," said her grandmother.

But at dusk she put on her coat and fur cap and went out.

"Eat something before you go, child!" the old woman called after her.

"I am not hungry, grandmother."

She started off along the lake shore, on the snow-covered ice. Through the twilight she saw a canoe approaching from the south-east. She hesitated for a moment, and then went on again.

When she reached the post yard, she saw a number of carts there, from which the tethered and blanketed horses were eating their hay. The store was crowded with people, among them many lovely women and smartly-dressed men. Nipsya recognized the four people who had camped beside the lake in September, and she also noticed five members of the Royal North West Mounted Police. All the merchandise had been cleared away and the counter removed. The room looked ever so large and was lighted by a lamp at each of its four corners. Only the stove remained in the centre and many people were warming themselves before it should be removed to make room for the dancers.

Nipsya stood at the door, not daring to go in.

"You ought not to have come, Nipsya!"

She recognized Vital's voice, but did not turn round; she did not want to meet his eyes.

"Won't you come with me? I will take you home in the canoe."

"No, Vital. Leave me!"

"I'll not leave you any more! If you won't come away, we may as well go in and see everything."

He pushed her before him, through the doorway. At that moment, Monsieur Alec came downstairs with a smiling blonde on his arm. There were cries of welcome from the crowd. The factor shook the outstretched hands, gradually coming nearer to Vital and Nipsya until he found himself face to face with them.

"Look, Flora!" he said to his wife, in a low tone. "Here is the little friend I told you about. I think she is feeling badly. Be nice to her."

But when the smiling girl beheld two coldly-hostile eyes staring out of a strangely-pale face, she grimaced, and instead of holding out her hand, said to the factor, in an aside:

"I believe you cared more for her than for me. You are not to see her any more."

"What childishness, Flora!" he exclaimed; then, raising his voice:

"And this is her cousin, Vital Lajeunesse, a son of the well-known Bonhomme Lajeunesse whose name you have heard often in Edmonton."

She offered her hand with no show of eagerness, and then, turning to her husband again, murmured:

"He is a fine-looking man, but you can see that there's Indian blood in him."

"Be careful, Flora!" he warned her in a low voice, drawing her farther away. "They have sharp ears

and observant eyes. They are fine people. Don't offend them."

"So you are still afraid of a rebellion?" she said, smiling. "But those Métis are little better than Indians. Our Mounted Police would soon settle them."

"They are fine people," he repeated. "There is no need to offend them."

"Oh, I'll be polite: don't worry!"

No detail escaped Nipsya: the lovely white satin dress, the pearl necklace, the gold bracelet, the blonde curls, the elegant manner, the fluent speech, the cultured voice. All this was enough for her.

She went out, and started back toward the lake, which could not be seen through the darkness.

"Don't go by the lake, Nipsya! The air-holes are dangerous. Wait for me, at least!" Vital called.

But she was already a good way off, and sped on without answering. Vital knew that he could not overtake her with the canoe and that he would need the long snowshoes of trappers on that first ice of unequal thickness. He went back and asked Beaudoin to lend him his, and then dashed in pursuit of the dark form which he could see dimly, gliding over the snow in the distance.

Chapter VII

DEATH LOOKS ON

HALFWAY across, a cape barred the fugitive's way. Instead of following the curve of the shore, she made straight for the dark point.

Suddenly, the ice cracked under her weight, and she sank almost entirely. Instinctively, she grasped the solid edge and tried to pull herself up, but that ice broke, too, and she had difficulty in finding another point of support. This time, she stretched out her arms over the snow-covered surface and made another attempt to raise herself, but again the surface gave way under the pressure, and she had a desperate struggle among the ice-blocks before she could get her hands on firm, solid ice again.

The coldness of the water went right through her, making her clothes heavy and her limbs numb. Her heart seemed dead within her. She was no longer conscious of any will-power or desire.

She looked at that white expanse, at the sombre cape, and at the dark waters of the lake with its tremulous reflections of the star-strewn sky. She raised her eyes to that unfathomable roof which had always come to her mind whenever Alma had said: "Our Father, Who art in heaven." But Monsieur

Alec thought there might be nothing at all up there, nothing anywhere. Nevertheless, she would have believed as Vital did, if the latter had wished it. But now, what was the use? Monsieur Alec had loved that city girl all the time. She could see now that a poor Métisse had been a mere pastime, something to play with for a few days, and then throw aside. Yes, at this moment, everything was ended. She no longer had anyone but her grandmother, who did not need her. Grandmother would go to live in the big white house.

She felt herself being drawn slowly into the depths of the cold waters, and with an effort turned her head to look over the lake. No, the canoe was not coming. She had expected as much. Even Vital had forsaken her. But why shouldn't he, when she had chosen Monsieur Alec? She had no one left, now. It was all over. No, she must not weep! And it would be just as well not to call for help; then, no one would see her die. She had only a little longer to wait. Already, there was no more strength left in her arms. She could not feel anything any more. She could hardly think, even, any more. But what a lovely star that was, over the big white house! Sirius, Monsieur Alec had said. Alma would be saying the prayer now. Was that star one of the Great Spirit's eyes? Could He see her? Was He feeling sorry for her? "Our Father. . . ." She had never

known a father, even on earth. If there was one up there, she did not know Him. It might displease Him to see her making no effort; but, truly, she had suffered too much already. Besides, it was too late. She could no longer move. . . . "Do the best you know, the best you can." . . . She could do that no longer. She was falling asleep. She was almost asleep already. Her eyes were closing. . . .

"Hold on, Nipsya!"

She half-opened her eyes to see Vital in front of her, laying two poles on the snow, then rolling them along under his snowshoes. She felt her right wrist gripped firmly, felt herself lifted gently, irresistibly, and dragged over the snow for a little while, then lifted again and carried in his arms.

"Wake up, Nipsya!"

She opened her eyes. Vital was forcing her to swallow some liquor that warmed her throat and heart.

"Can you stand up?"

She was unable to answer. He tried to keep her on her feet, but she allowed herself to slip down on the snow.

"Make an effort! Rouse yourself!"

He spoke almost angrily.

"Here! Take another drink!"

Then he took hold of her wrists, pulled her up and let her fall heavily to her knees again, and while

Death looked on, he kept up this tragic game, making her jump up and down in front of him like a helpless doll. Such violence shook her to the very brain, and gradually banished the torpor which had seemed to her irresistible. She managed to stammer:

"L-let me a-lone!"

"No. You would be frozen stiff in ten minutes. Don't let yourself die! Pull yourself together!"

She made an effort to obey him, to stiffen her knees and her whole body, and soon a little warmth and feeling returned to her limbs. She did not fall any more, though she was still unsteady. Her mind and sight had grown clearer.

"Let me alone, Vital! Let me alone!"

"Then rouse yourself!"

"I think I could walk now."

He supported her while she tried the first steps. He forced her to go faster and faster and when she no longer staggered, stopped her.

"Take off your coat and put mine on!"

He had to assist her, for the fur was stiff with ice. As soon as she was wrapped in his large warm coat, he dragged her on again and she was able to follow him faster and faster until they were running. Vital was taking her home by the forest trail where the snow was not deep and the air less sharp. They ran until they reached the shack.

"Undress her, grandmother! Here is some rum!

Give her a quarter of a cupful in very hot water. I am going back for my snowshoes and canoe and Nipsya's coat."

When he returned, he found Nipsya in the purple-and-green dress that she had worn in the summer. She was squatting beside the fire, her face hidden in her arms on her grandmother's knees. At intervals, she still shivered violently.

"How do you feel, Nipsya?"

"I am all right, Vital."

"Very well, then. You are both going to collect your belongings. I am taking you across the lake."

"*Hunhun*! Do you take your grandmother for a very obedient girl?" the old woman asked him.

"No, grandmother; but don't you see that that would be the best thing to do?"

"He will never want to come here again," his grandmother assured him.

"But are you sure his wife won't bother you? I saw that she was jealous. As for him, he did well to speak frankly!" said her grandson.

Nipsya sat silent, shivering. The cold was not yet out of her veins. Vital picked up one of the furs he had brought from the canoe and held it to the fire, and when it was quite warm wrapped it around his cousin. He drew up the stool and sat down beside her.

"Listen, Nipsya! There is another thing. I ought never to have let you go away. I was angry. I had misjudged you. What happened later was partly my fault, because I ought to have foreseen it. And then, when I heard that the factor was coming here, and when I saw your light in the evenings, I didn't want to believe that he had good intentions. I thought you were accepting his visits, knowing that he had evil motives. That would have ended everything between us. When I heard that he was going to Edmonton to be married, I went there as quickly as he did, with the intention of making public what I knew. At first, we almost came to blows; and then I decided that he must be speaking the truth, although, even then, I was not too sure of it. To-night, I saw that he had been honest and you, too, and that I was the one in the wrong. He is a finer man than I thought. If you will forgive me, Nipsya, we can be friends again as before. Will you?"

Nipsya tried to rouse herself from the stupor that was stealing over her.

"I have nothing to forgive, Vital. I wanted to leave you. It's a wonder you can forgive me. And besides, you see, I can't understand anything any more. I don't want anything any more."

She had raised herself slightly and was staring into the fire, her hands clasped between her knees.

Her grandmother, too, looked into the flames, with a faraway expression in her eyes.

"Nipsya, you are hurting me!" Vital went on. "But I have deserved it. I am making you suffer, too. I ought to give you time to recover, but I am afraid. I am afraid of the irreparable this time. I don't want to be separated from you any longer. Listen to me! Try to understand what I say! To-morrow, it might be too late. Wake up, Nipsya! Listen to me!"

He laid his strong hand on her shoulder and gave her a slight shake.

"When we began to live near each other, we both thought of marriage. But I could not suggest that, because a Christian should not marry a pagan. You knew that, and wanted to adopt my religion. You thought that by being baptised you had fulfilled all requirements and had a claim on me. When you saw that I didn't come any closer, you were offended. You took advantage of Mahigan's coming, in order to make me jealous. You succeeded better than you thought, and now we are both paying for our folly. There was one thing that you did not see, Nipsya, and that I saw only too well: you had become a Christian in name only. You thought that by imitating my thoughts and actions, you were adopting my religion. That was why I would not give in to your curiosity. I did not want you to learn *my* religion,

because it was not *my* religion that you needed, but religion itself. . . . Don't you feel now, that without an ever-present love, limitless and deathless, our life on earth is only one misery after another? Don't you feel that your pain would be softened if you believed that you were loved by a Spirit of unfailing kindness? And the foundation of religion, Nipsya, is renunciation—for love's sake. Do you understand?"

She raised her head and spoke wearily:

"I wish I could, Vital! But I cannot believe in anything any more. I have been hurt too much. Leave me! I would rather stay here."

"Nipsya, I would give anything, even my life, if I might spare you this suffering, but I cannot! I cannot! Haven't you any more courage than a white woman? Can't you at least help me a little against yourself? Forgive me, if I hurt you, Nipsya, but I must! You force me to say it, but over there on the lake, I saw your eyes begging for death. And in your heart you are feeling that way yet. I cannot leave you here. I cannot! . . . Grandmother, do help me! She is only a child, after all."

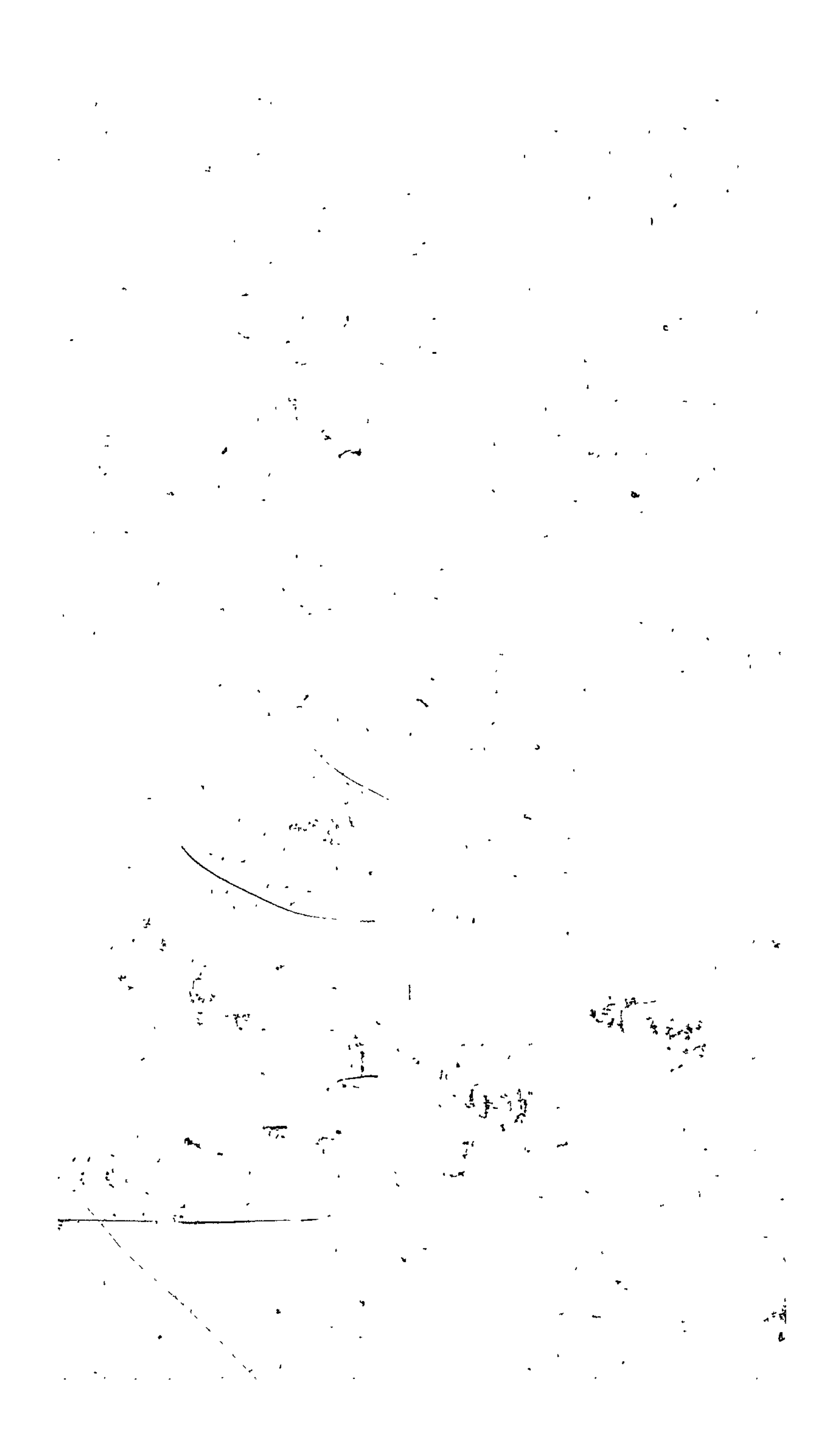
"You are right, Vital. We are going to take her."

At the hour when Sirius was in the middle of its course, they were all together again in the big white house.

The next day, the entire lake was frozen over, for

during the night the wind had covered those high-lands with the same icy sheet as lay over the vast Barren Lands to the north-east.

END OF PART TWO



PART THREE

Chapter I

MAHIGAN'S ATONEMENT

FOR several days, Nipsya remained aloof and sore of heart. She spent most of her time in the little room, hidden under the blankets, shrinking from every word and look except her grandmother's, for with the latter she felt no shame. Vital's presence, particularly, she found intolerable. She would come to the table only after everyone else had finished eating, help herself to a morsel of food, and go back to the bedroom to eat it. Occasionally, her uncle went in to see her.

"Come, now! Be a sensible girl!"

Behind his encouraging words she sensed an indulgent pity that was harder to bear than reproach. She knew that she ought to be grateful for their tactful, patient kindness, but could not bring herself to show it. She saw that they had known all the time that Monsieur Alec had no intention of marrying her, and she had made it plain that she had hoped he would—she ought not to have shown herself at the post—and she was making it even plainer by shutting herself up alone and refusing to speak. Alma had asked her twice if she would like to come and say the evening prayer with them, but she had

not answered. She had a secret grievance against Vital's God: she had tried to serve Him and He had not given her the reward that she had expected.

When she learned that the Black-Robe was going to say Mass on the following Sunday, and that she would have to come out of her only refuge, it angered her to think that she would no longer have even a place to hide her pain. She would never show herself and endure the Black-Robe's questions and other people's inquisitiveness. For a moment she thought of running away; whither, she hardly knew —unless she went back to Mahigan. *He* wouldn't hurt her with his pity. He might laugh. He wouldn't have any hard feelings toward her. She would be his equal. He would love her ardently without requiring her to become so perfect.

But what was the use of running away? Vital would soon overtake her and he would tell her again that she was behaving like a child.

On Saturday afternoon, the missionary did not arrive. Just before sunset, Nipsya heard Vital come in and say:

"Courtepatte has just told me not to expect Father Lozée to-night. He has gone to baptise Mistatim's baby, born yesterday; it came before its time and is not strong. He will very likely stay overnight and won't get here until morning."

It was through this simple event that Nipsya had her first real contact with Death, who took a delight in stirring up her thoughts with his terrible, yet beneficent, fingers. It was then that she had her first clear vision of greatness, of nobleness, of restoration through atonement, and it came to her through the very man with whom, for a moment, she had thought of seeking happiness by defying spiritual laws.

In later days, she was to look back often on the tragedy witnessed by the islet on the Plus Grand Lac des Aigles. For a long time, the Indians narrated it; then the white men took it up and embellished it until it became a sort of legend which good story-tellers repeat even to this day, in the long winter evenings:

(i)

In a valley of the Athabasca there lies an oval lake, extending east and west. On a certain December day, it was already frozen over and covered with that dazzling, velvety mantle which the first snow lays over the closed waters and the sleeping earth. The pale gold of the winter sun streamed down upon it. Its shores, on all sides, were thickly-peopled with century-old trees—willows, poplars, birches, larches, black spruces, and occasional pines

—all standing straight and motionless, petrified in the frozen silence.

Yet, at intervals, as the cold grew more or less intense, the ice contracted or expanded with cracklings and rumblings, followed by musical vibrations that rippled over the surface and spread through the entire valley. At other times, the shrill howl of a coyote rent the air, rebounding from solitude to solitude and dying away in the far-off silences.

In the middle of this lake there is an oblong islet, steep and rocky, its sides hollowed out by the waves except at the southern end, where the softer rock has crumbled. Its flat top, swept bare by the winds, gives it the appearance of an ancient altar, a dolmen erected on a desert plain. On that December day, it looked so dark against the whiteness, so grim in its isolation, that it was as a stain on a white robe, or as a sin on a pure soul. The Indians, believing it to be haunted by the Evil Spirit, had called it "The Islet of Mati-Manito (the Sneaky Spirit)".

But Kitse-Manito, the Great Spirit, Who is everywhere, Who sees everything, Who knows everything, looked upon His work and saw that it was good.

(ii)

From the east side of the lake a black speck moved toward the islet, gradually growing taller and trail-

ing a long shadow on the snow, for the sun was already low on the horizon.

It was Mahigan.

On his back was a pack containing his trapping outfit. His right hand, swinging rhythmically, carried a gun. He wore a large fur cap, purchased at the Hudson's Bay post near by, and his small, dark eyes were gleaming beneath its glossy rim; neither the sun, shining full in his face, nor the blinding dazzle of the snow could alter the peculiar fixity of his gaze. His bronzed cheek-bones, flat nose, and thick lips protruded above his thin, stubby, black beard. His garments were of that light, pliant, whitish leather which results when unsmoked moose-hide is properly tanned. His cuffs, sleeves and collar, elaborately trimmed with red and blue arabesques of dyed and plaited hairs, seemed alive, owing to the flutterings of very fine leather fringes. Three rows of tiny glass beads of different colours glittered on his moccasins. In his belt was an axe.

At the foot of the islet, Mahigan laid down his pack and gun. With his knife, he cut a red-barked shoot of *kinikinik*, peeled off the coarser part of the bark, and carefully scraped the thin cambium layer into the palm of his hand. To this he added a pinch of dry tobacco—a matter of taste and economy. When he had lit his pipe with slow, luxurious puffs, he went to look at his traps.

This was a very good place for muskrats. In the summer, the low grassy shore was thickly covered with the reeds and rushes which this animal uses to fashion its nest; also, the islet's sinister reputation kept other trappers at a distance. As for Mahigan, he had no fear of Mati-Manito.

He had not gone twenty paces when he stopped short. Fresh tracks were visible near the first trap, in which only the rump and tail of a weasel remained.

"*Hunhun!*"

Mahigan put out his pipe with a pinch of snow, went back for his gun, and then followed those fresh tracks. At the north end of the shore, he suddenly came face to face with the thief, caught in a trap; it was a magnificent silver fox, still alive, and from beneath a clump of willows its eyes gleamed and closed alternately.

"*Hunhun! Hunhun!*"

This time, Mahigan grasped two facts: it was an unexpected stroke of luck; it was not his. He had never placed a trap in this particular spot. But if he was not afraid of demons, he was even less afraid of man. He dispatched the animal promptly with the back of his axe and hurriedly began stripping off its precious skin.

(iii)

To the south, another black speck had detached itself swiftly from the edge of the brown forest and was running over the white surface of the lake. The newcomer very soon reached the islet; he clambered up the loose rocks and walked along the flat top to the north end. His walk, dress, figure, and face were very like Mahigan's.

Upon reaching the edge of the overhanging cliff, he lay flat on his stomach and, for a moment, watched what was going on down below. Then, in a low, calm voice, he said:

"Mahigan!"

Mahigan started slightly. He paused in his nearly-finished task and looked all round him. Instinctively, he raised his head. He saw the barrel of a rifle pointed right between his eyes and, beyond it, a face with one eye closed and the other gleaming above the sights with curious intentness.

"Mahigan, you have taken what belongs to me. Leave it!"

"Mistatim, this islet is my hunting-ground."

"The land is anybody's. Haven't you put your traps close to mine before? And have I ever touched any of your catches? But you have stolen mine before. That is a low-down trick. We are brothers, with the same father and mother. I have a wife; you haven't."

"You have always had the best luck. . . . It is all ~~right. I am going."~~

Mahigan got up. With one bound, before the other had decided what to do, he was under the shelter of the overhanging cliff, rifle in hand.

Mistatim drew back. It was his turn to find himself in a tight corner. Under cover of the beetling cliffs, his brother might change his place and attack him unawares from he knew not where, perhaps from behind. He crawled backward and lay flat in the middle of the islet.

Suddenly, he heard faint crunchings on the east side. Was his brother making off with the precious fur? Pointing his rifle in that direction, he crawled to the edge and raised himself a little. He scarcely had time to glimpse the silvery pelt hanging from Mahigan's belt and Mahigan himself walking backward, ready to shoot, before a bullet struck his skull, making him give a slight jump. Then he crumpled up at the edge of the cliff, on the snow-covered face of the islet.

And all Nature shuddered at the reverberation of that tragic sound.

After a few minutes, Mahigan approached cautiously, clambered up the rocks at the southern end, and, seeing the motionless form, went and shook it.

"*Hunhun!*"

He pulled off his victim's fur cap, then replaced

it. The bullet had struck the top of his forehead. Blood was trickling on to the snow, staining it with a crimson pool that grew larger and larger, setting a seal of unusually vivid colour on the islet—now more than ever resembling an ancient altar—on the lake with its white, velvety mantle, and on the entire valley, peopled with its grey, century-old trees, petrified in the frozen silence.

Then, Mahigan's eyes, which had been so peculiarly steady, began to blink as if in too strong a light. Yet the sun had already gone down behind the far-off western hills, and everything in the valley was growing darker.

Mahigan descended the rocks slowly, put the silvery spoil in his pack, then turned eastward again.

And the Great Spirit, Who is everywhere, Who sees everything, Who knows everything, looked upon His work and saw that it was good.

(iv)

Mahigan was only half-way across the lake when, in the east, a dark figure appeared on its pearl-grey surface, near the edge of the bush.

"*Hunhun!*"

This signified merely perception, not recognition. Mahigan paused for a moment and stared intently.

"*Hunhun!*"

This time, he had recognised the figure. Having

come to a decision, he went on again, and the two shadows glided nearer to each other in the deepening twilight.

"Good evening, my son!"

"*Hunhun*! Where are you going so late, Father?"

Father Lozée stood still. His strong frame was warmly clad in a brown bear-skin. A haversack was slung across his shoulders. Below his beaver cap, his face was round and full and quite pink. His clear, keen eyes, flashing under the grey, bushy eyebrows, looked right through the blinking eyes of Mahigan, into his very soul.

"I am on my way to your brother's. His wife has just given birth to a son and I am going to baptise him."

"*Hunhun*!"

Mahigan's eyes fell. There was a brief space of deep silence.

"Father, you never repeat what is told to the priest of Kitse-Manito?"

"Never, my son."

"Mistatim will never speak to you again, Father! He wanted to steal my hunting-ground. Mati-Manito urged me, and I killed my brother."

"Where? When?"

"Just now, on the Islet of Mati-Manito. Will my Father grant me the forgiveness of Kitse-Manito?"

"My son, tell me everything. Mistatim was not

bad. It is you whom they call a thief. What did you quarrel about? What had you stolen from him?"

"The islet is my hunting-ground."

"Tell me everything, my son. If you have stolen, you must give back. If you have killed, you must repent; you must make amends; you must help his wife; and you must expiate your crime and do penance from this time on."

"Would Kitse-Manito be satisfied with twenty muskrat skins?"

"A hundred muskrat skins would not make up for your crime. Your very heart must weep."

"Would Kitse-Manito be satisfied with two hundred muskrat skins?"

"Mahigan, God has nothing to do with muskrat skins. He desires to see remorse in a bleeding heart."

"Would Kitse-Manito be satisfied with half the value of a silver fox?"

"Ah! So that is what you stole? Wretched slayer of your brother! And still you try to bargain! To a heart such as yours God never grants His pardon. Begone, and never come back until you have repented! Mahigan, it is not possible for any man to sell himself to God!"

(v)

As Mahigan went on his way, night fell, the night of the Alberta highlands where shadow is yet lumi-

nous; a night that comes early and lingers late, rising from the snow-covered plains in the east to the snow-covered plains of the sky; a night when the Aurora Borealis holds carnival, undulating from horizon to horizon, her radiant tresses streaming behind her, translucent and powdered with stars.

When Mahigan reached the edge of the bush, he did not turn round, did not look back at the islet that resembled an ancient altar, but plunged into the leafless gloom and soon afterwards arrived at his log shack.

It stood in the middle of a long clearing where, in an earlier time, fire had destroyed the forest. The snow-covered ground gleamed wanly in the darkness. It bristled with coal-black stumps and was strewn with black-ribbed skeletons over which the snow had laid pale shrouds.

Usually, Mahigan did not worry about how things looked, but that night he sat at his door very late. He had no fire, for the soft breath of the Chinook wind was coming from the south-west in slow, warm puffs. Suddenly, he noticed that everything in front of him was taking on a reddish tint; the snow was turning pink; yet the afterglow had faded long ago.

Coming from nowhere, something was beginning to fill the starry skies—something like a ghostly emanation, or like the mist that drifts slowly from

the mouth of one who sighs in a frozen atmosphere. But this must have been an endless sigh, an extraordinary sigh, for the mist gradually spread across the middle of the heavens, from west to east, and it was red.

Mahigan had never seen this rare phenomenon before. He felt uneasy. What could it mean?

From pale, transparent red, the mist gradually deepened, particularly in the centre, and formed a long streak almost parallel to the Milky Way. Through this purple mist, in unfathomable depths of deepest violet, the stars twinkled like astonished eyes.

From pale red, the mist rapidly turned bright red, almost scarlet. And how it glowed, palpitated, quivered! It moved as if instinct with life. Shapes crowned with fiery haloes appeared, unrolling themselves majestically, stretching themselves out in wavy lines, separating, commencing to turn in vast, sinuous curves, then breaking up and vanishing like sluggish eddies on the sheen of a broad stream.

At times, they seemed to descend earthward, letting fall a rain of crimson light that bathed the snow in roseate hues. Furtive gleams quivered like sudden, fleeting flashes of lightning in the distance, or the flash of a gun in darkness.

Hosts of weird apparitions, tinged with purple, descended slowly from the zenith of the heavens,

unrolled themselves and, breaking up, spread out in vast waves that flooded almost the entire firmament. They emitted what looked like blood-spurts, and these gave birth to monstrous shapes that seemed to dart about, fly from horizon to horizon, then meet and mingle; they appeared and disappeared by turns, like powers of life in conflict with powers of death.

On the ground, near the haggard-eyed man, everything was bathed in an unearthly light. The black skeletons had assumed livid hues; the entire clearing seemed inundated by a tide of discoloured blood.

Mahigan, sitting motionless at his shack door, closed his eyes and shuddered. He had fancied he saw an islet on that lake of discoloured blood and on top of the islet two mournful eyes in the pale, frozen face of a corpse.

He was not sure, at first, that all this was a threat from Kitse-Manito, but he sensed some formidable power behind it. This feeling grew in intensity until emotion brought conviction. Children and simple-minded people who do not reason things out, may reform, if they are bad, through fear of punishment. Mahigan felt in his heart that there was a Supreme Power: he did not feel that there was not. That, for him, was sufficient. He could disbelieve no longer. It seemed evident to him that some expiation for his crime was about to be required of him; that his pun-

ishment would be meted out by degrees and inexorably. Then, like other souls of stronger mould, who feel their doubts disappear in the face of Death, Mahigan formed a resolve and agreed to the sacrifice. He rose and went into his shack, replaced the silver fur in his belt, and picked up his gun. Stoically, without haste, he went back toward the lake.

As if already appeased, the red apparitions gradually lost their bloody tints. Their brightness increased; they turned pink, then white, amber, gold, pale green, and mauve. Gliding back to the north, they formed a vast arc, tranquil and watchful. Rays of serene light radiated from it so that it resembled an immense fan.

(vi)

The frozen, snow-covered lake lay bathed in the tranquil, silvery radiance of the northern lights. The century-old trees that peopled its shores had been wakened from their frozen slumber by the warm breath of the Chinook; their tops swayed with musical rustlings; their branches sang softly of this ephemeral resurrection.

In the midst of the icy plain, the silent islet was waiting.

Out of the east, a black speck moved nearer. It was Mahigan. Just before reaching the top of the

loose rocks, he stared fixedly. He stopped short. The missionary's tracks, which he had followed, went no farther, but came down again, and it looked as if he had slipped, as if his feet had fled that spot precipitately; Mahigan could see his irregular footprints, like those of a frantic, staggering man, running south across the lake.

Mahigan climbed to the top and looked about. The snow showed that neither human being nor animal had walked upon its surface since he had left it. And yet, the still form was no longer there. Only a pool of blood remained.

"*Hunhun*! Mati-Manito has carried off my brother to the Land of the Spirits. Now to go and redeem my brother!"

Stoically, he placed his gun upright, with the butt resting on the ground. Kneeling on his right knee, he placed his chin over the barrel, then pressed the trigger with his thumb. All round the prostrate man, the snow was sprinkled with drops of blood and small fragments of brain and bone.

And again, all Nature shuddered as the tragic sound reverberated from hill to hill and died away in the depths of far-off valleys.

(vii)

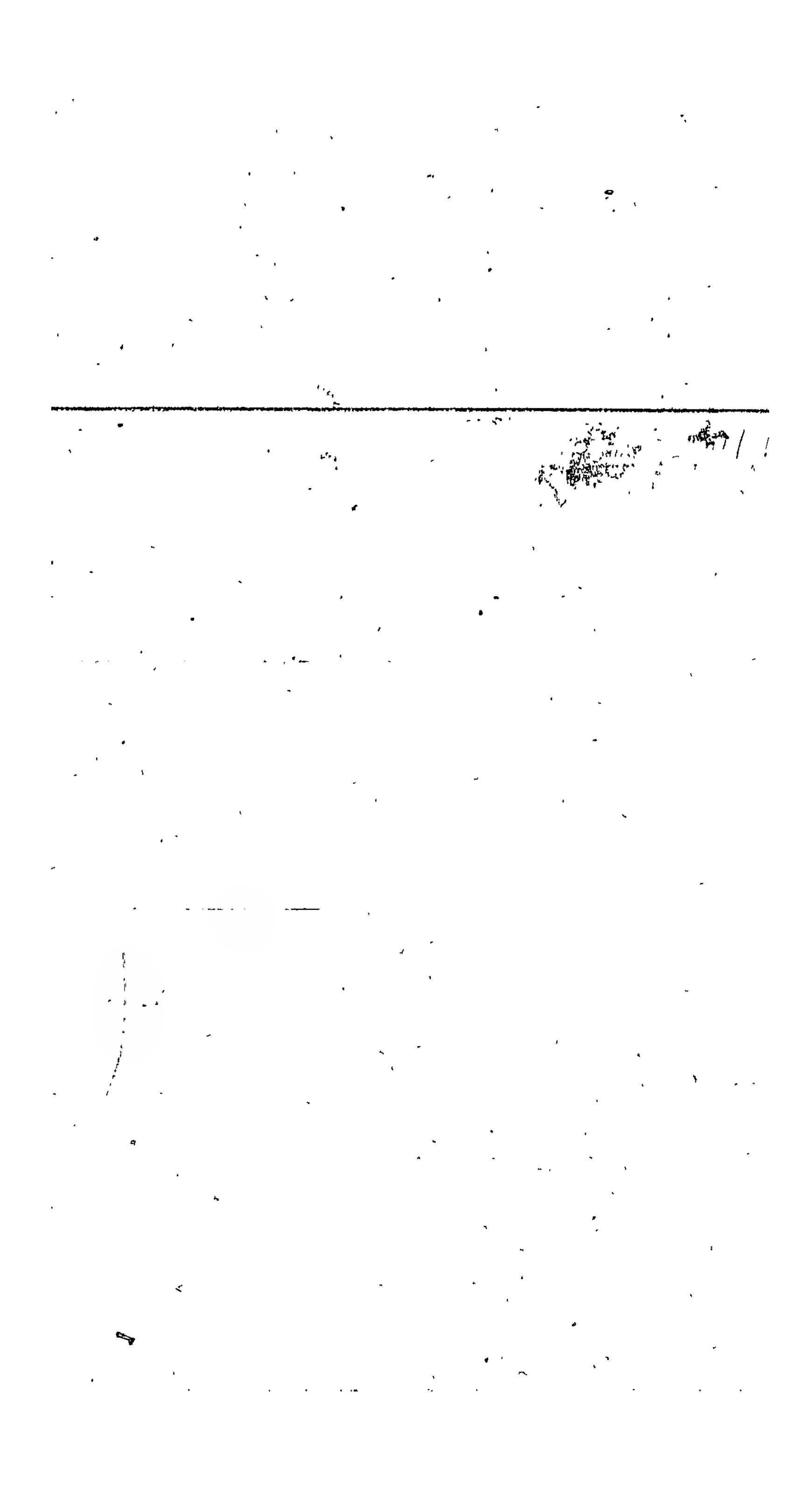
In his exaltation of mind, Mahigan had lost his shrewdness. Before staggering over the lake, the slid-

ing tracks that descended the loose rocks turned eastward, under the cliff, and stopped near a thick clump of willows. It was on these willows that Mistatim had fallen with the first movement of returning consciousness, for the bullet had merely made a jagged gash in the frontal bone. Father Lozée had heard him fall and, finding him unconscious again and growing cold, had carried him away.

Upon reaching Mistatim's home, he had given him medical aid and baptised his child. Mistatim was soon restored to consciousness. In the middle of the night, the tragic shot had made them all shudder. With one accord, without saying a word, the two men had gone out.

On the flat top of the islet, the pearl-grey radiance of the northern lights shone on three figures under the tranquil night sky—a missionary, who stood praying; a motionless form lying on the snow at his feet; and the bowed, kneeling figure of a poor Indian, weeping silently in his heart.

From that night, the Islet of Mati-Manito was known as the Islet of Kitse-Manito. And the Great Spirit, Who is everywhere, Who sees everything, Who knows everything, looked upon His work and saw that it was good.



Chapter II

THE BEST POTION

LONG before the tardy dawn, Father Lozée arrived at the Lajeunesse home and related what had happened. As all had been asleep, no one had seen the phenomenal display of northern lights, but the Bonhomme, who was familiar with the wonderful nights of the Barren Lands, was not at all surprised to hear about it.

At daybreak, the grandmother said to Vital:

"I shall bring Nipsya back before dark."

And after breakfast, she and her grand-daughter set out for the Plus Grand Lac des Aigles. By the time they arrived, several Crees who lived on the shores of that lake were already there. While their dog-trains stood in a circle round the islet, men and women in turn climbed up to look at the corpse and came down again. At midday, they erected a low tent over the body, without disturbing it, without removing the gun or the silvery pelt. The tent was of fine, new skins and was made secure with poles and rocks.

Nipsya watched all these rites and listened to the remarks:

"He was not a good man, but he died like a brave."

"Mahigan is the last of the true Crees."

Solemn thoughts hammered at her heart. Once again, and at the end of a life that had seemed to belie them, she was reminded of her cousin's words: "Do the best you know, the best you can." Hitherto, she had regarded them only as a means to a desired end, a path that would lead her to personal happiness. But now, these words took on a new meaning and a greater force. This man whom she had known to be gay, ardent, profligate, had given all for his brother, without any hope of reward. He had been mistaken, but his very mistake only made his sacrifice seem the greater and he who had had an evil reputation was now worthy of admiration.

But she, who had thought herself better than Mahigan, what had she given? Had she ever tried to do anything for others without a thought of self? Yes, she realised now that the only way for anyone to prove his love for another is by sacrifice, absolute sacrifice—without reward—sacrifice that kills some part of the soul of him who loves, in order that some new life may be born in the soul of the loved one. She had, all the time, been acting like a child that behaves well only in the hope of being rewarded.

Had she any right to feel resentment because Vital, or even Monsieur Alec, had treated her as a

child? She had thought that she had every right to thrust herself upon them, every right to demand that they should give themselves in return; and they had cast her aside.

As to Monsieur Alec, that was over. As to Vital, she would never ask anything more of him, but ~~would do whatever he wanted her to do; then, she~~ would be but a slave. Very well! At least he could accuse her no longer of becoming a Christian just to please him; nor could he accuse her of making himself or any other man the reason for her good behaviour. From now on, she would do her duty as Mahigan had done his. By sacrificing her conceit, she would regain her pride.

And when, on their return to the big white house, Nipsya found the Black-Robe and several neighbours having supper in the lamplight, she accompanied her grandmother without any hesitation, though with crimson cheeks and downcast eyes, to the far end of the long table and stoically endured the intolerable stares.

After supper, she helped Alma clear the table, then took her chair and sat near the stove. She answered the Black-Robe's few words politely but coldly. She did not like his too-penetrating eyes, although she no longer wanted to run away from them. When all the guests had gone and the priest

knelt with the Lajeunesse family for the evening prayer, Nipsya remained seated.

Several days passed. Nipsya resumed her old tasks. She spent the short days doing housework and looking after the domestic animals outside. But her grave eyes had grown almost hard, impenetrable too, like her grandmother's.

When the weather was not too raw, she went with her uncle to catch whitefish on the lake, which was now frozen solid. With an axe, they chopped holes in the ice, close enough together to allow them to pass nets underneath by means of a long, floating pole. When the cold was too intense, or the wind too piercing, she stayed indoors and went on with the work which she usually did in the evenings. Alma was teaching her to spin yarn and knit stockings and mitts.

Vital was out of doors nearly all the time, as long as the daylight lasted. Early every morning, he would attend to the cattle and clean the stable, hauling the manure to the snow-covered garden with the aid of a horse and a stone-boat. He was away for nearly a week when he and one of his young Quebec neighbours took three fat oxen to Edmonton. Sometimes, when the snow was deep enough, he set the rack on the sleighs and went to the meadow in the early morning for a load of hay. If the weather was

mild, he hitched up the oxen, if cold, he took the horses. Occasionally, prospective buyers accompanied him. Sometimes, he brought back a load of spruce- or pine-logs, and a neighbour would come over and help him saw them into lumber. Other days, when there was only a light breeze, he would take some barley sheaves on to the lake, and after sweeping a space clean of snow, would thresh them with a flail, while a swarm of little "snow-birds" would come gleaning behind him. In the evenings, as soon as the lamp was lit, he would open one of his books and bury himself in it. Nipsya would often catch him looking at her reproachfully, sometimes amusedly, and he would seem on the point of speaking to her, but would restrain himself.

In the third week of the month, the Chinook began to blow, at first boisterously, then gently, and it blew thus for three days. The snow melted almost entirely. On the lake, where it clung to the smooth surface of the ice, the wind sculptured it in little ripples so that it looked like an immense fleece of dazzling whiteness. Horses could then venture onto the lake without slipping, and the people who lived on the south shore could cross to the Hudson's Bay post in a straight line.

On the day before Christmas Eve, after the midday meal, Vital said to Nipsya:

"Would you like to go to the post with me?"

She stood silent, without raising her eyes, and the colour left her face. He said again:

"Would you like to go to the post with me?"

"Yes."

"Then get ready, while I hitch up the horses."

He came back for her and helped her into the light cutter which he had brought from Edmonton. After wrapping her up warmly, he seated himself on her right. They made the trip in silence. Nipsya was expecting a cruel ordeal and was bracing herself to meet it with fortitude.

They found Monsieur Alec in the store, and though he seemed a little uncomfortable, his greeting was cordial. While Vital was purchasing more than a hundred pounds of provisions for the Christmas festivities, Nipsya ventured now and then to meet the factor's eyes, which were kindly and good-natured; he did not seem so embarrassed with her as with her cousin. It surprised Nipsya that this renewal of their relations should be so simple and leave her so unmoved.

When they were back on the lake, where the horses had merely to follow their previous tracks, Vital held the reins with one hand. Putting his left arm about Nipsya's shoulders, he leaned close to her.

"Won't you kiss me?"

Her eyes filled suddenly with tears and she stared

straight before her, across the dazzling, sunlit snow.

"Why are you crying?"

"I am not crying," she said, in a voice that trembled.

"Why won't you kiss me?"

"It can't be true that you still love me, Vital?"

"I have always loved you, and I love you even more now."

"But I can't pray any more. I can't believe any longer that the Great Spirit is kind."

"Nipsya, there is but one law for every living thing, and that is that it must fulfill its destiny. Do you see those withered reeds over there? In the summer, countless water-lilies grow around them and fish is plentiful there. The reeds, by their very withering, accomplish something that was decreed by a loving Providence. In the spring, they will decay, but the decayed matter will produce new life. If the reeds did not give themselves in that way, both the water-lilies and the fish would disappear. And we, too, have to fulfill the law within us. We have to look upon sorrow and death as a rich mould in which to sow our thought and will. Do you understand me?"

"I wish I could believe you, Vital, but perhaps there is no Great Spirit."

"Nipsya, aren't you as conscious of the Great Spirit's presence as of your own life? Don't the

lakes and forests everywhere breathe of eternity? Don't you know that there are hidden powers in all things? And since their work is so beautiful, so harmonious, so continuous, doesn't it follow that they must be governed by a Supreme Power? Didn't the most primitive of our Cree ancestors admit that? Doesn't our grandmother believe it as implicitly as the Black-Robes?"

She did not answer immediately. She had never really doubted the Great Spirit's existence, only His kindness. She had steeled herself against the suffering that had come to her, but without unbelief and without blasphemy. Now, her heart was trying to resist the new hope that assailed it. In this moment, she saw clearly that neither Mahigan nor Monsieur Alec had loved her truly; that only this man at her side loved her truly, this man who had put her mental and spiritual welfare before his own pleasure.

"I shall believe whatever will please you, Vital," she said at last.

"No, Nipsya! Not for my sake!" he said, earnestly. "You must not make me the ultimate aim of your life: I am only a poor, unworthy weakling whom Death will call away. You must find the supreme love, the love that knows no death."

"I would like to try again, Vital."

She felt the sudden tightening of his arm about

her, but was not sure whether this expression of a new tenderness was prompted by pain or joy.

"Won't you help me, Vital? I am only a girl, and so weak and proud!"

At that, he drew her close against his breast. Looking up, she was astonished to see tears in his eyes. His voice, when he could speak, was almost a sob:

"Nipsya! Beloved! It is I who have been wicked toward you, I who would be a mere savage but for the Black-Robes. But I will never leave you again. It is for you to forgive. Won't you kiss me now, Nipsya?"

Gravely, she offered her lips, and he caught her in his arms with an unrestrained passion that made her senses reel. It seemed to her that they would never be able to loosen their hold of one another.

From that evening, Nipsya took part in their prayers again.

During the days that followed, there were happy festivities in the Lajeunesse home. On Christmas Eve, the dog-trains had begun to arrive, two sons of Cléophas, with other members of their families, coming from Batoche, and another son from Red River. Among the guests were some people who were on their way from the far north to spend the winter

in Edmonton Village; they had detoured in order to see the Bonhomme again and hear him tell of his explorations.

After New Year's, the house gradually settled into its customary quiet.

Vital now spent his evenings beside Nipsya, holding her close in the lamplight. He would open a book and give her lessons. Sitting beside him, she did not feel the passion that Mahigan's ardent eyes had awakened in her, or the mental fascination that she had experienced with Monsieur Alec, but only a profound peace, solemn even to sadness, yet infinitely sweet—the sort of peace that man ascribes to rain-drenched woods after glorious storms.

Vital told her of the great sublime loves that are immortalised in the Scriptures. Such stories kindled a religious fervour in Nipsya and brought her a new satisfaction bordering on happiness.

Every day, she was patiently learning to read. At first, it gave her splitting headaches, but she welcomed this suffering that came through Vital because thereby she could make up for her rebellious conduct of the past.

When Father Lozée paid his next visit, in the middle of January, he found Nipsya equally ready for her first communion and her first confession. The priest was rather astonished when, early the next morning, he saw not only the worshippers of previ-

ous months arriving, but numerous people whom he knew to be of another religion. The Bonhomme answered his unspoken queries with a sly smile.

"We have a lot of people here this morning, monsieur le curé!"

"But to celebrate what?"

"The marriage of Monsieur Vital Lajeunesse to Mademoiselle Vitaline Alma Nipsya. It will be performed this morning by monsieur le curé of Lac Sainte-Anne."

"Well, I certainly had my suspicions, Bonhomme, especially when I saw the factor with his violin."

After the ceremony, and a banquet that lived long in the memories of the inhabitants of that district, the big white house rang with the feet of dancers. Monsieur Alec was noted for his lively playing of the "Red River Jig." The Bonhomme led it with Nipsya, and several of the young people who danced it earned a lasting reputation for agility and endurance.

The supper was as surprising as the dinner. Nipsya's grandmother, who had again surpassed herself, was highly praised and could not help betraying a little pride before those white people who thus acknowledged a point of superiority in herself. Then the merry talk and the dancing went on until dawn.

From that day, the main room was left to the

young married couple. The Bonhomme slept in the other.

Nipsya's eyes now radiated a soft, serene light, like that of stars in the night sky when clouds have been swept away by the wind, and her lips again wore the happy smile of those earlier days when the ineffable radiance had lain upon all things. She took a passionate joy in everything she did, because each act enabled her to satisfy without any struggle the two great loves that filled her heart. She was no longer sure which of these two loves was the stronger: the divine had become human, the human almost divine.

And yet, there were times when, if she saw Vital talking in low tones with a messenger from Louis Riel or heard him discussing with her grandmother the import of events that were taking place, she experienced an anguish that she had not the strength to throw off.

But the varied monotony of the winter chores, and the long winter evenings spent with her husband and always enlivened by Alma's gaiety and the old voyageur's inexhaustible tales, would make her forget her anxieties and she would throw herself whole-heartedly into the happiness of the present.

Chapter III

THE VOYAGEUR'S LAST ADVENTURE

EARLY in February, Vital and his young wife went by cutter to the villages of Saint-Albert and Edmonton, to sell their butter and purchase an American bob-sled. Nipsya was amazed at the white people's countless inventions displayed in the store-windows, but they held no lure for her. And the mode of life of the people who brought upon themselves all kinds of trouble and worry in their struggle to acquire such curious things—quite unnecessary in Nipsya's opinion—did not appeal to her at all.

She was glad to leave the place and get back to the unbroken peace of the big white house, back to her life with Vital; hers was evidently a poor sort of existence in the eyes of those devotees of luxury, but it was free and sweet.

On the day after their return, when dinner was over, Vital hitched up his best team to the sled, which he was anxious to try out. He planned to cross the lake to the Forêt des Aigles for a load of young tamaracks to be used as fence-posts.

"Wait a minute, Vital!" Cléophas called. "I'll

get my fur coat and go with you. It is quite a while since I was in one of those sleds."

"Look at the sky, father!"

"Yes; that means a snow-storm. But never mind! We shall be back before dark. I have seen worse than that up north."

"Just as you like, father."

The snow on the lake was barely six inches deep and the sled glided well. As soon as they reached the forest, Vital began felling trees and lopping off branches rapidly, while Cléophas carried the heavy tamarack poles and piled them on the sled. A north-east wind sprang up and a fine, dry snow began to fall.

"Yes," said the old man, "we are going to have a blizzard with the gale full in our faces. That'll be no fun! *Mon Dieu*! These tamaracks are not very light, but it warms the blood up. My back's all wet with sweat."

By the time they had finished, the overcast sky had caused a premature twilight. The young man hurriedly secured his load of poles with the chain, planted his axe on the top, grasped the reins, and jumped on the sled.

"Are you ready, father?"

"All set! Go ahead!"

The horses started off at a quick pace and within half an hour were half-way across the lake. The

snow was now falling in large flakes, driven almost horizontally by a gale of wind, and Vital, who was getting them full in his face, had difficulty in keeping his team in a straight line; their first tracks had been obliterated already, and instinctively they were making for the shore where they would find shelter among the trees. Vital turned round to look at his father, for it surprised him not to hear his voice. Then he brought his horses to a dead stop. The Bonhomme was no longer there.

He made his team retrace their steps immediately, urging them in the direction of the Forêt des Aigles, meanwhile calling at the top of his voice. After several minutes, he saw a dark figure emerge from the moving screen of snowflakes.

"Father! You gave me quite a scare! But what have you done with your coat?"

"Lost it. I was too warm when we left, so I laid it on top of the load. Then I turned my back to the storm and spent a good while trying to light my pipe. When I turned round to put my coat on, it wasn't there. I jumped off, thinking I'd find it again right away, but this devil of a wind must have blown it along and covered it with snow. Dear me! I am not any too warm now. No, no! Keep your own on! If one of us ought to freeze, it's your old fool of a father!"

But Vital forced him to accept his coat and then,

in order to keep warm, himself, started his horses at a trot toward the house and ran beside the load, beating his sides with his arms. They were soon there.

At supper-time, the Bonhomme ate as usual, but the next morning he had no appetite. He went to the rocking-chair beside the stove, and lit his pipe, but after two or three puffs, laid it down on the window-ledge.

"What is the matter, father? Why don't you smoke?" Alma asked.

"I don't feel well. I think the winter has got into my bones. I haven't got warmed up yet after last night."

"Would you like a cup of hot water and rum?"

"Yes, if you think it'll do me any good. Make it very hot and put plenty of rum in it."

The grandmother studied him gravely.

"Will you try my remedies?"

"I am willing, mother. I feel sick all over."

She made him a hot drink of birch-syrup. He took everything that they gave him, but failed to recover his usual good spirits. When Vital and Nipsya came in from the stable, he was rocking himself silently, with a meditative expression.

"What is the matter, father?" his son enquired, anxiously.

"Don't worry, Vital! I'll be better just now."

"Why aren't you smoking?"

"I don't feel like it. Don't bother about me. Do your chores as usual."

At noon, he did not want anything to eat. He made another attempt to smoke his pipe, but allowed it to go out in his hand as it rested on his knee. Instead of rocking, he was sitting motionless now, and appeared lost in thought. Without any sign of impatience, he accepted every remedy they suggested: tamarack-gum, and drinks made from pine, absinthe, or wild mint. That night, he complained of a pain in his chest and ached all over.

"It hurts me to breathe," he said.

"You ought to lie down on my bed for a little while, father," Vital told him.

"Me! Well, if you think that will do me any good, I'll do as you wish."

But, on the bed, he coughed and choked. He sat up, while the others stood round him, not knowing what to do.

"No, mother, I can't stay on a bed. I've got to have my rocking-chair. No, no, Nipsya; not here! Leave it by the stove, there's a good girl!"

He sat there all evening and all night. His face had grown pale and his lips purple. At times, he seemed to be losing consciousness and they saw him exerting all his strength to keep himself upright.

They tried to warm his hands and feet with warmed wool.

"Poor children! Don't tire yourselves out, so," he said.

In the early morning, he rallied. He said he was burning hot all over and would like to go outside for a while. Nipsya went with him. He put his arm about her neck and leaned on her a little, and they stood at the door for a few minutes, looking out into the night and listening to its sounds. The ice on the lake was cracking with a dull rumble. In the vast forest on the opposite shore, and on the hills to the south, the poplars were splitting with the intense cold. Only the tremulous stars appeared alive, shining through an atmosphere that was as motionless as if it were frozen.

"It's a *frette noère* ('black cold'), as they say in Quebec when it's as cold as this," said the old man. "Listen, child! I can tell you, because you won't feel it so badly as my own children: the Bonhomme has not much longer to live. But I don't want to let them see it. If they don't notice it, you, yourself, must send for the Black-Robe. Go to Courtepatte's place to-morrow morning. He has fast horses and will soon reach Lac Sainte-Anne. And now, my dear, I'm relying on you to make my boy's life happy. He's the best of my children. Help him all you can to be a good man and a good Christian."

They went indoors again, and he resumed his seat. At daylight, his eyes were delirious.

"Push on, Paquette! Don't be scared of the Indian manitous. To the deuce with the devils! There is a good God, after all. Don't be scared! That's only the roar of rapids. We'll see, when we get to them. I want to know what lies beyond. Push on, Paquette!"

Then he slept a little. When he awoke, he looked about him with a dazed expression.

"How do you feel now, father?" asked Vital.

"Oh, I am getting better, getting better!"

"Would you like some breakfast?"

"If you think it would strengthen me, I will have some."

He sat at the table with them and sipped a cup of tea and ate a little bread and butter. But neither that day nor the next showed any improvement in him. Many people came to see him, but did not stay long for fear of exhausting him. Father Lozée had come to soften the departure of his old friend and administer extreme unction. For this, the Bonhomme had consented to lie down for a little while.

Vital shed no tears, although his eyes were red and burning. Alma sobbed and moaned, and Nipsya wished that she could do the same, but, like her grandmother, she was ashamed of tears and wept in her heart.

On the last day, the Bonhomme, still sitting in his chair, expressed his last wishes:

"Alma, you ought to choose the elder of the two Quebec boys; he is a serious, hard-working lad. Vital, you have a good wife; don't ask too much of her. Tell my other children I thought about them to the end. Ask them to pray for me as they do for my dead wife. If they have the means, I'd like them to have masses sung for me. And now I'll lie down while you tell the beads and pray the Holy Virgin to ask *le bon Dieu* not to look too closely at my sins."

Vital wanted to assist him to the bed, but the Bonhomme went to it without leaning on his son's arm.

"No, no, Vital! It is hard, but *le bon Dieu* suffered far more on the cross. I must do something in return."

Then, lying down, he gave the responses to the prayers recited by the weeping Alma. At the fifth decade he stopped. There was a brief rattling in his throat. Then, he lay motionless.

The old voyageur had set out to explore the realms of eternity.

Three days later, Vital and Nipsya, followed by all the friends they had been able to notify, took the coffin containing his frozen body to Lac Sainte-

Anne, and Father Lozée blessed the grave where he was laid beside his wife.

The earth received him back, as it receives everything that grows or moves a while on its surface. Beneath a few clods, it swallowed up this man who, in his brief life, had broken so many new trails for humanity, over vast, unknown territories.



Chapter IV

THE HOUR STRIKES

THE month of March was nearing its end. The higher, warmer sun, aided by the warm breath of the Chinook, had melted nearly all the snow. Upon the hills to the south, beneath the willows and poplars, there remained only a few patches, but the entire surface of the lake was white yet.

One night, at about ten o'clock, when the whole family had gone to bed, and Vital had extinguished the lamp, they heard the ring of horses' hoofs on the frozen ground. Then the door was opened softly and someone came in.

"It is Octave Lajeunesse. Don't make any light! The Mounted Police are after me."

Nipsya did not stir from her bed as Vital got up, put on his clothes, and asked in a low voice:

"What news, Octave?"

"Riel now needs all those who think as he does."

"Did you know that my father was dead and that I was married?" Vital asked him.

"Yes, we knew that."

"Come to the stable! We can talk better there."

Nipsya heard these words and a great terror took

all the strength out of her. The two men went out, and quietly, very quietly, closed the door. Nipsya lay still in the darkness, and for some time was conscious only of the throbbing of her heart. . . . For over an hour, she endured the conflict between her old self and her new self, and it was slow torture. . . .

Then she heard her husband come in, alone, and sit down beside the stove, where he remained motionless and silent.

"Are you going, Vital?" Nipsya whispered.

"I don't know."

She went and sat on his knees and put her arms about his neck. She could barely distinguish his features. He seemed to have a sad expression, to be lost in his thoughts, and he embraced her abstractedly. She divined that he, too, was enduring an inner conflict; that he, too, was asking himself where his duty lay and was then seeking reasons for evading it. The thought occurred to her that if she tempted him, he might perhaps remain with her. But she recalled again the words and the example of that dead man who had entrusted his son to her, and who had made no parade of his ability to endure pain, but had concealed his sufferings so as not to give pain to others. She had recalled his words and his example too often to be able to shake them off now.

"You need not worry about me, Vital," she said at last.

"I am not so sure about that. What will become of you? What will become of you both, if I get killed over there?"

She hid her face in her husband's neck and shuddered.

"You need not worry about me, Vital," she repeated bravely. "I shall have your child. *Le bon Dieu* will look after everything. People don't die before their time, but when it comes. . . ."

"Are you anxious for me to go?"

"No, no! I don't want you to go. I don't know whether you should go. I only want you to do what you ought. I, too, am trying to do the best I know, the best I can. You asked me, once, to help you against myself. . . ."

With sudden passion, he gathered her close in his arms, while his lips sought hers, and Nipsya no longer knew whether their love held more of joy or of pain.

"Nipsya! My own Nipsya! Now, truly, you are flesh of my flesh, soul of my soul. And I find you only in the hour of leaving you. . . ."

They clung to each other for a long time, until he said:

"Go and bring grandmother! Don't waken Alma; she wouldn't want me to go over there."

The three held counsel in the darkness, talking in low voices. Long before dawn, Vital was already far along the road of destiny. Nipsya was on her knees, with her head on her arms, in her grandmother's lap, while the old woman gently stroked her loosened hair. This time, Nipsya was at the mercy of a storm of unbearable tears that scorched her eyes and heart as if they had been tears of flame, and shook her with sobs that tore at her throat and breast because she had never learned how to control them.

Then, feeling ashamed, as if guilty of cowardice, she said:

"You must go and get some rest, grandmother! I am going back to bed."

But she could not have slept. She knelt at her bedside until dawn, her eyes uplifted to the picture and the black cross, which she could barely distinguish on the white wall.

Chapter V

THE WILLOWS

INTERMINABLE weeks went by, during which she was strengthened by a faith that now went beyond her native soil, her horizon of lakes and forests, beyond her very self. Her mind encompassed the vast territories of the North-West, for which so many men were fighting on the prairies. She accepted all her anguish of every day and every night as the price of Vital's safety and her people's freedom.

Sometimes, when she recalled some saying of the old voyageur, she would marvel that such a trivial happening as crossing from the north to the south shore of the lake should have wrought such swift and profound changes in her.

Her anguish increased with each fresh report that reached her. Three armies were advancing against the insurgent Métis. Few men of the neighbourhood had followed Vital, and the Indians nearly everywhere were yet irresolute. The Mounted Police had set a watch over every post to see that no one bought powder or shot. The post at the Lac des Aigles had been abandoned long since, everything having been removed when Monsieur Alec and his young wife

had sought safety behind the guns and cannons of Fort Edmonton.

Around the big white house, life with its demands for daily tasks went on quietly, the hardest part of the work being done by Pierre Langlois, the elder of the two Quebec boys, with the occasional assistance of Mistatim. By the third week in April, Pierre had sowed half the new field with wheat and at the beginning of May, he sowed the remainder with oats. The freshly-ploughed garden was partly sowed with barley. Alma and Nipsya, and sometimes their grandmother, looked after the vegetables there.

Alma had begun to treat her admirer seriously. Often, they would go off by themselves for more intimate talks, making Vital's young wife feel lonelier than ever. She had only her grandmother left, and this affection no longer sufficed for her as it had in her childhood. The old Indian woman's *médecine* remained mute: she only knew that Vital was not coming.

"I never receive any message from him," she said. "His thoughts don't come to me any more. They always go to you."

Late in May, when the entire countryside was growing green again in the sudden spring, their fears were redoubled by disastrous news. After the favourable Battle of Fish Creek, the Métis were retreating before the red-coats, the latter having been rein-

forced by volunteers from Ontario, Batoche was stormed and, shortly afterwards, Riel and several of his officers were captured.

Those days filled Nipsya with a well-nigh unbearable anguish that was breaking her. As soon as the evening chores were done, she would steal away under the leafing poplars and birches that bordered the lake on the north side of the garden, and seat herself, Indian fashion, on the new grass at the edge of the bank. Her hands would be supporting a dog's head between her knees and its eyes would gaze enquiringly into hers, but she would pay no attention to it. Over where the sun was setting, the lake, still strewn with floating ice, would reflect a sky of red and gold, and its waters would be tinted with scintillations of scarlet and pink and bronze; but Nipsya would not be mindful of it. Myriad vespers would rise all around her, the loudest being the croaking of frogs and the piercing chatter of blackbirds in the leafing trees; but she would not be listening to them. The entire countryside would be exhaling a strong odour of damp soil, of decaying plants steeped in water, the odour of universal and wholesome decay, the mold of new generations. And Nipsya, who, since the previous spring, had penetrated deeper into the mysteries of life and death, would wonder if she were fated to see the one being who was dearer to her than all else in the world fall

a prey to the inexorable law, in order that other living forces might be born of him, both in the soil and in her heart. Haunted by the memory of a corpse on a snow-covered islet, she would imagine another corpse, lying in the midst of others on the new grass of an immense prairie far away to the east.

Would even that supreme sacrifice be in vain? When they were abandoned, left without a protector, would the enemy come and seize the big white house and all their land—all that would remain of Vital?

But her suffering was not without consolation, for she was now sure that a child would be born to her and that in her child, as in herself, Vital would go on living. But even this consolation had failed as yet to bring her any strength. Watching the resurrection of Nature, she would meditate on the impenetrable reasons for the law of death, which Vital had taught her to regard and revere as a mystery of love.

One evening, at the end of the month, Nipsya was sitting on the bank beneath a cloudy sky, gazing at the crimson and purple sunset which made the Forêt des Aigles look like a fiery forest blazing in the dusk. Just before it disappeared, the sun rested for a mo-

ment on the top of a large black pine, so that it resembled an enormous flower of flame.

The air was still and oppressively warm. Gulls screamed plaintively over the lake. High above the garden, a night-hawk hovered, uttering sharp cries like those of a newly-hatched bird, and then dropped suddenly, with the swiftness of a feathered arrow and the whirr of a bow-string. Far in the darkened east, the dusk was pierced by flashes of lightning.

Suddenly, Nipsya heard shouts and the galloping of many horses in the distance, on the Lac Sainte-Anne trail. Trembling all over, she ran in that direction.

A band of horsemen emerged from the bush, escorting a cart bearing two people, one of them the Black-Robe. As they came nearer, she knew. Almost at once, the Black-Robe's companion sprang down and, without a word, gathered her in his arms. Nipsya, too, said nothing. She was unable to speak. But there was no need. It was enough for her to look into her husband's eyes and see that they were happy, very happy. And anyway, the others were making noise enough: it had frightened away all the cattle. Nipsya at length became aware of Father Lozée, extending his hand with an expression of mingled compassion and amusement, and she gave him hers.

Some of the horsemen had already ridden away

in different directions to spread the good news around the countryside.

Later, Vital killed his fattest sheep and provided a banquet like those of the Bonhomme's time, not only for the men who had returned with him from the war but for all the neighbours who had hastened to the big white house.

A storm broke over the district, with loud crashes of thunder. Squalls of rain lashed the window-panes, which took on all the colours of the rainbow as the light of the lamps caught the glistening rivulets. And the hearts of the fighters who had returned to their lands and their crops rejoiced in that much-needed rain even as they rejoiced in the very blood that several of them had poured out on the prairie for the benefit of a finer and more lasting harvest. Tales of heroism were narrated.

The priest had brought a cask of real French wine and he poured it into the guests' tin cups, himself. Then, returning to his seat, which, as on previous occasions, was the place of honour at the end of the long table, he said:

"My friends, since man needs a visible sign to represent and consecrate his joy, let this wine from the land of some of your ancestors,—a noble land of liberty,—serve to celebrate your sacrifices and defeat. You fought without much hope of victory, but in a way to make you feared. You are now sure of

being respected and of obtaining that which you have demanded for so long. Our vast territories of the Canadian West will have their own separate government, elected by yourselves, and will work out their own destiny. Your land-titles will be granted you without further delay: of that I have been formally assured. The rights of the Crees will be safeguarded, and the State will protect them from the greed of white men."

His voice was drowned in such applause that he was unable to continue.

The tall figure of Vital, on the priest's right, rose next. Lifting his cup of wine, he addressed them:

"My friends, I desire to voice the gratitude of everyone toward Monseigneur Vital Grandin, our bishop and my godfather, also Father Lozée, Father Lacombe, and the other missionaries, who have always shown themselves defenders of our rights and have obtained as much, perhaps, by their peaceful words as we have gained with weapons. We owe it to them to-day that we find ourselves free men again, instead of languishing in prison. Let us keep forever in our hearts the memory of Louis Riel, who will be shown no mercy!"

"And also," cried another voice, "let us drink to Vital Lajeunesse, the bravest and best of our captains! As his father, the Bonhomme, opened up our

country for the feet of men, so he himself has helped us open it up for the feet of Liberty."

The following afternoon, Vital and Nipsya were walking back, hand-in-hand, from the new field, where the wheat and barley had commenced to cover the black soil with a vigorous growth of green. There, again, out of wholesome decay was coming forth life. Along the shady trail which had been broken the previous year, many of the willows, which are slow to leaf, had as yet only their catkins: some of these, half-opened, were pale- or golden-yellow; others, barely out of their winter sheaths, were silky and glistened in the sunlight like tiny silvery pelts. The branches, varying in colour from pale-yellow to brightest red, were speckled all over with buds that looked like tiny, motionless insects in wing-sheaths. These buds, too, were of an infinite variety of tints.

Nipsya, as usual, was admiring the willows lovingly, pointing out those that were the most curiously-shaped. Once, espying among them a shrub of more unusual form, she actually laughed, her soul brimming over with thankful joy.

Vital was filled with wonderment at her laughter, which he had never heard before. As they walked on toward the big white house, he gave expression to the song that rippled through his heart:

"Last year, when I was ploughing that new ground, I thought of the harvests that would nourish my race and make the flesh and blood of my children. I was not sure, then, that they would be your children, too. But I saw a long line of sturdy generations linked to that field. Each furrow would make a livelihood for this child or that. I tried to picture them to myself but could not. Now, I see them like you, because I want them to be like you."

Nipsya, conscious of the child beneath her heart, was silent, but her fingers tightened about Vital's, while her eyes were radiant with a reverent wonder.

"Your soul is like that of the willows, Nipsya, like the soul of our race—perennial and ever-varying.

"After the forest was consumed by the great fire, and every living thing had been buried beneath the ashes, the surface was later covered with moss. But the first seeds to grow out of the moss and restore an appearance of life were those of the willows and a few grasses even more humble. Those willows became the energy, the blood, the very soul of our country. They enriched the devastated earth with every fall of their withered leaves; they adorned it with their numerous shapes, growing ever more diverse with each succeeding generation. By all their deaths, they made the good soil out of which grew the large trees that to-day form another vast forest;

where our sons will find century-old giants. But those large trees do not choke the willows: they only make them grow taller.

"So you see, the giants of the forest could never have existed, any more than the giants among men, without the humble growths that became food to add to their stature. And those giant trees and giant men, in their turn, only make a greater quantity of wholesome, creative nourishment, or, it may be, food for another great fire. For all living things, including even man, grow only for the tomb; they add a little more depth to the ashes; and only the Eternal Workman Himself knows what order, what harmony, will come out of those ashes.

"But it will always be the humble willows among the trees, and the humble men among the nations, who, so long as life shall remain on the earth's surface, will build it up anew on the ruins of the centuries.

"Nipsya, may our sons be like yourself and the willows—humble, useful, diverse,—and may they, too, become the blood and the soul of the country, the obedient servants of the Great Wisdom!"

THE END